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Under Stalin's Yoke

by

Eliezer Basch

Additional Information

Translated from the original Yiddish by Eva Basch

With the assistance of Sara Rosenfeld

Eva Basch

PII Redacted

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Holocaust Survivors' Memoirs Project

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Background

Under Stalin's Yoke by Eliezer Basch is an autobiographical work about the author's experiences in the Soviet Gulag from 1940 to 1948. It was written in Yiddish in the mid-sixties, and won wide critical acclaim when serialized in the Montreal-based Yiddish newspaper, the *Keneder Adler*. He self-published it in book form in 1980, in a limited edition. It has recently been translated into English by his daughter, Eva Basch. Elie Wiesel, Nobel Prize laureate, cited Basch's works in his recent book of memoirs, *All Rivers Run into the Sea*, as follows:

> *Leizer Bash* (sic) *and his young fiancée ... spent ... years [in the Soviet Union] ... Arrested after setting foot on Soviet soil, they were accused of spying for the bourgeois fascists. They were ... sent from prison to prison and camp to camp, and finally wound up in Siberia. In his suffering Leizer discovered in himself a vocation as a Yiddish writer. His works are eyewitness accounts of life in the Gulag ten years before Solzhenitsyn (28).*

Overall Summary

Under Stalin's Yoke is a sweeping narrative covering eight years of the author's life. The book details his experiences as he tried to flee from the Nazis from his hometown, Sighet, Romania to the Soviet Union. He and his fiancée (whom he refers to as *B* throughout the entire volume) were immediately arrested and ultimately imprisoned in Siberia for crimes they did not commit. For years, they were separated, each in their own purgatory, wanderers forced from their homeland, plagued by human brutality, pestilence, starvation, cold, and the workings of their own conscience. Basch chronicles not only his own personal story as he struggled to survive in infernal conditions, but also those of several others he met along the way. Blessed with a photographic memory, he provides his highly accurate and detailed narration, listing not only places and dates, but also the sense of what it was like to have been there at that time. Throughout, even in the midst of infernal conditions, Basch manages to convey a sense of hope, humour – and love.

Chapter Summary

Acknowledgements

Author's Foreword

The author argues that it would be a grave injustice not to include, among the casualties of the Holocaust, the unfortunate souls who perished as prisoners of the Soviets.

Introduction: I Had a Dream!

In a cell of a Soviet prison is an inscription etched in crude Yiddish characters, written by a man – like the author – who believed that he could sneak into Paradise through a Russian door. They were quickly and brutally divested of their illusions.

Chapter 1: God's Imperfect Little World

1940: A description of the town of Sighet, Romania, and the impact of the war on its Jewish population.

Chapter 2: Fawning Jackals

September 1940: Hungary seizes a section of Transylvania, including Sighet. The Jewish population reacts.

Chapter 3: The Madman Knows

The author graphically details the Hungarian occupation of Transylvania, and the worsening situation of the Jews.

Chapter 4: Cheating Death

Many Jews are tempted to flee the Fascists by illegally crossing the border into the Soviet Union. The author is forced to consider this option.

Chapter 5: All Mixed Up

The author describes growing up in a Hassidic family, and his ambivalence about announcing his impending departure to his parents. He arranges to meet his beloved ***B*** later that day, and take the train with her to a town near the border between Hungary and Russia.

Chapter 6: God Will Help You

In a touching scene, the author takes leave of his parents, who later perished in the Holocaust. His mother packs food, clothing and religious articles for him to take along.

Chapter 7: Adieu Sighet

B does not meet the author at the appointed time. He is forced to take the train without her.

Chapter 8: Boldly Marching Forward

We are introduced to the other members of the author's group as they brave the harrowing and treacherous journey to reach the border. Among them are:

Itzik Baer Junger, an intellectual and close friend of the author;

Feivel Y, a young communist, who failed at his first attempt to cross the border;

Moshe 'the Red,' a bombastic communist;

Rudolph Weiss, an older man from Slovakia.

Chapter 9: Sheep Without a Shepherd

After much difficulty, the author and his group make it across the border.

Chapter 10: The Worst Is Over

November 7, 1940: The author and members of his group are arrested. They cannot understand why they are treated as criminals. They are interrogated and not given any food before being brutally transported to the Nadvornaya jail.

Chapter 11: They Trod on My Name

We learn of the admission procedures in the Nadvornaya jail. Soldiers defile the author's precious personal and religious articles. He is placed into a crowded, foul-smelling cell. Moshe and Rudolph are taken ill. The author is relieved that his beloved *B* did not come with him. We are introduced to two men in the same cell as the author:

Herschel Pollack who fled from a town in the Carpathians with his fiancée, **Leah'ke**;

Bernat Berkovics, who arrived together with his wife, **Fanny** and their three-year old son.

Chapter 12: The Happiest Couple in The Whole World

The author learns, to his great surprise and consternation, that *B* crossed the border some days after him, and is in the Nadvornaya jail. His conscience plagues him constantly. The prisoners undergo more procedures in preparation for another transport. The author and *B* are in the same boxcar. They arrive at Stanislav prison, and are brutally separated.

Chapter 13: The Horse's Plight

The author is shoved into a stinking cell filled with wild-looking hairy creatures. He likens his condition to that of the horse in Steinbarg's fable, *The Horse and the Whip*. He sinks deeper and deeper into despair.

Chapter 14: My Sorrow and Shame

The author is one of only three Jews in the prison cell. The Jews are shunned by the other inmates, and long for their homes. We learn about the tragic story of **Mich'l Wiesel**, who had inadvertently killed the wife of his best friend.

Chapter 15: Why Are You Here?

The author falls ill, is sent to the infirmary and meets up with ***Panie* Stram**, a Polish Jew, who has a bizarre outlook on the role of the Nazis and the Soviets with regards to the Jews.

Chapter 16: If Not Lower…

The author is placed in a cell together with some friends and acquaintances, including Itzik Baer Junger, Herschel Pollack, and Bernat Berkovics. Herschel is brutally punished for his repeated requests for a *svidanie* (a meeting) with his beloved Leah'ke.

Chapter 17: Entangled in a Net

February 1941: The author undergoes an interrogation. He is then transferred to a transit cell, whence he and thousands of other inmates are herded into boxcars. On the train they suffer intense thirst and cold, and Rudolph Weiss dies. A prisoners' revolt is immediately squelched.

Chapter 18: *Svidanie*

March 1, 1941: The inmates disembark from the train, and march in the mud and wet snow to the Starobelsk prison. The author catches a glimpse of *B*. His friend Itzik Baer Junger becomes more and more bitter and defeated, and has a near brush with death. He admonishes the author for successfully reviving him. The author, Herschel Pollack, and Bernat Berkovics successfully achieve their aim and meet with their respective wives/fiancées. We witness a touching scene, wherein *B* presents the author with four portions of bread taken from her own meagre rations. They will not see each other again for seven years.

Chapter 19: Sing *Oy Vey*

Spring 1941: The author and *B* have been sentenced to three years hard labour. The inmates try to lighten their dark mood by joking about their situation. At great personal risk to themselves and to others, *B* and the author manage to exchange letters within the prison. The author spends some time with Oscar, *B*'s younger brother, who has been transformed from a cheerful boy to a sullen, angry young man.

Chapter 20: The Prison Bazaar

The author is placed in a block with a thousand other prisoners. Transactions of food and clothing take place on a regular basis. Smokers have ingenious methods for creating fire. *Panie* Stram is in very poor health and can barely eat. Instead of doing a good deed by giving away his leftover pieces of bread, he bargains for them. Moshe agrees to take on all of Stram's sins, and give up all of his own good deeds, in exchange for some of Stram's bread.

Chapter 21: Bread of Affliction

The observance of Passover is virtually impossible in the Starobelsk prison. Only one person, **Margolis**, an observant and learned Jew, manages, under extreme hardship to adhere to the traditional laws of kashruth. The Jews reminisce about the Seder nights back home. We learn of the ultimate fate of Moshe the Red and Itzik Baer Junger.

Chapter 22: Torah on one Foot

Margolis explains to the author the very complicated calculation for figuring out when the Jewish holidays fall.

Chapter 23: Remote Corners of the Earth

The prisoners are prepared for another transport, and are not fed. Some of them protest and are harshly punished in full view of the others. They are loaded into boxcars and transported north towards the Arctic Circle. The author believes that *B* is on the same transport as he.

Chapter 24: Bread For Bread

The author gives his new Sabbath suit to a guard in exchange for a loaf of bread that he believes the guard will give to *B*. Unbeknownst to the author, the women's boxcars got hitched to a different transport – heading south towards Soviet Central Asia.

Chapter 25: The Blue Sky Wept

The author is transported farther and farther north. On May 15, 1941, he arrives in Pechora. He is surprised to see daylight in the middle of the night. He searches in vain for *B* or for any familiar face. The prisoners march to a holding area, where *zhuliks* (hardened criminals) reign and terrorize the others.

Chapter 26: Forward, Ever Forward

The convicts trudge through mud and snow for many hours. A blizzard hits. The author unexpectedly meets up with Feivel Y. The prisoners arrive at their labour camp and are immediately sent out to work felling and transporting wood. Their tools are defective, yet they are expected to fulfill their quota. They are placed on reduced rations for not having fulfilled their quota.

Chapter 27: Child's Play

The author becomes a *dokhodiaga* (a weakling incapable of fulfilling his quota), and is regularly fed a reduced portion. **Eliakhin**, a *Stakhanovets* (an overachiever who receives an elevated portion), taunts the author and predicts that he won't last a year in such adverse conditions. The author befriends another *dokhodiaga*, a Polish Jew named **Ber'l Lederman**. They give each other moral support. The author uses his overcoat as a blanket and shares it with Lederman. There is much corruption in the camp, and the overcoat – his last link with the past – gets stolen. The author works laying railroad tracks. Often when he cannot fulfill the norm, he is obliged to work a double shift on a starvation portion.

Chapter 28: Farewell, Dear Friend

The Nazis attack the Soviet Union. Conditions in the camp grow more difficult. Polish prisoners are granted amnesty. The author benefits from the improved treatment accorded the Poles. The author bids farewell to Lederman, his only friend in the camp.

Chapter 29: *Zhid*!

The harsh arctic winter arrives. The author is mistreated by the other prisoners because he is a Jew. One prisoner sets the author's coat on fire, forcing him to remain naked in the sub-zero temperatures. On another occasion, the author develops frostbite, but is denied entry to the barracks until he has completed his quota of work. He unsuccessfully attempts to freeze his feet, in order to get a few days' rest. He later makes a 'non-aggression pact' with himself and determines to fight to survive for *B*'s sake.

Chapter 30: Angel of Mercy

The author is befriended by **Marusa**, a woman with some influence in the camp. She sees to it that he gets better treatment and increased rations. The author learns the secret behind her interest in him. Marusa gets transferred to another penal colony.

Chapter 31: An Extra Bite

After Marusa's departure, the author's situation grows worse. He volunteers to do extra work for some additional food, and is almost killed in the process. Food is very scarce. The author befriends an older inmate who recounts the horrific conditions in the camp many years ago.

Chapter 32: Resistance Was Futile

May 1942: The author is too weak to work and is sent to the infirmary. He makes the acquaintance of **Fischel Rubin**, an inmate who was shot in the leg, and is now disabled.

Eliakhin, the former overachiever, is dying of dysentery and pellagra. The author is assigned to another camp, where *zhuliks,* (hardened criminals) terrorize common prisoners, and forcefully take his yearly allotment of sugar.

Chapter 33: Tsepeleshter's Brigade

The author is assigned to a brigade consisting mostly of Jews. He makes the acquaintance of **Haïm Schichman**, a former professor. We learn of the sad fate of Bernat Bercovics and Herschel Pollack. The author is able to calculate when the Jewish High Holidays will fall, and on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur the Jewish members of his brigade do not work. Their brigade is soon disbanded.

Chapter 34: Wheel of Fortune

The author's three-year sentence is up, but he is not released. Haïm Schichman is now a paramedic, and often sends the author to the infirmary. The author contracts typhus, and is sent back and forth from the infirmary and the camp until the war is over. He is sent out to do hard labour, and in summer develops a severe allergy to insect bites.

Chapter 35: A Proper Yiddish Education

After the war, new arrivals are brought to the prison camp. Among them is a half-Jewish engineer who entreats the author to teach him Yiddish.

Chapter 36: A Higher Position

Haïm Schichman is liberated and sends provisions to the author, who now has a more privileged position as an interpreter. The author outsmarts a brigade leader who wants to get rid of him.

Chapter 37: *Portnoi*

The author narrates, with humour, how he is assigned to work as the camp *portnoi* (tailor) although he has never held a needle in his hand. He befriends the new camp commander, who makes his life easier.

Chapter 38: Stalin Wears Boots

New prisoners keep arriving. The author makes the acquaintance of **Haim Fishman** and **Yefim Spack** from Kishinev in Soviet occupied Bessarabia. The Jews try to ease their suffering by telling jokes – mostly political. We learn the reason Spack was sentenced to ten years hard labour.

Chapter 39: My World Became Dark

1946: There is much anti-Semitism in the camp. The author is assigned to work as an orderly in the hospital, and meets a former resident of his hometown. He learns, for the first time, about the Holocaust, and its effects on his immediate family. Fishel Rubin has both feet amputated. We are introduced to **Shlome Wieder**, who will provide the author with information on the whereabouts of his fiancée, *B*. Shlome is released, together with the other Carpathian Romanians. The author longs for his own release.

Chapter 40: FREE!

February 1947: The author is advised that he will be freed shortly. He meets up with a Transylvanian, **Zelig Jakobovics**. They are not allowed to be repatriated to a large city, so they decide to go to Belz, a small town in the Carpathians. They travel as free men on the train to Moscow. The author comes to terms with his spiritual and physical decline. After much difficulty, they reach Belz, where they are shunned as ex-cons. The Jewish community helps them out somewhat.

Chapter 41: The Holiest of My Heart

Jakobovics and the author head to Kishinev. They meet Yefim Spack's parents, who give them advice regarding where to find work. They visit Haïm Fishman's family, and the author is encouraged to go out with Haïm's sister, Clara. When he learns that *B* is alive, he cuts all ties with the Fishmans. Shlome Wieder has begun a relationship with Leah'ke, former fiancée of the late Herschel Pollack.

Chapter 42: Take My Advice

Jakobovics and the author work at a construction site opposite a POW camp. They will not be paid for a while yet, so they apply to the Jewish community for help. There they meet a very old-looking woman, who turns out to be the thirty-something Fanny Bercovics. She learns about the tragic death of her husband, Bernat. Fanny is still searching for her child, without success. She advises them to apply to be repatriated back

to Hungary. The author writes a letter to *B*, advising her to follow Fanny's suggestion. When he and Jakobovics attempt to do likewise, they are arrested on May 13, 1947, and placed in the POW camp with former Nazis.

Chapter 43: Jewish Nazis

Jakobovics and the author feel angry and uncomfortable working and sleeping alongside Nazis. They go on a hunger strike to protest their incarceration. They are given slightly better treatment and assigned to work at a shoe factory. A Jewish philanthropist visits them and brings the author letters from his siblings and from *B*.

Chapter 44: An Honest Citizen

As the 'Nazi' POWs march through the streets of Kishinev, young Jewish boys throw stones at them. The author is hit in the temple, and reacts with mixed feelings of pride and shame. Jakobovics and the author are freed once again, and request to be sent to the Munkacz repatriation centre.

Chapter 45: A Fragile Bridge Made of Paper

They arrive in Munkacz, a town that has much significance to the author, and are very warmly greeted by the small remnant of the Jewish community. There is no repatriation centre in Munkacz, so they are obliged to leave.

Chapter 46: Badge of Shame

When they apply to the Carpathian NKVD centre in Ungvár, they are arrested and sent to a POW camp in Lvov. There they meet **Herschel Fixler**, a young man from Slotvina, who recounts his sad tale.

Chapter 47 Hope

A Jewish officer at the Lvov POW camp advises the author that he will be freed on May 15, 1948. In the meantime, the author sends a postcard to *B* care of his brother Shmuel in Budapest. The Jews in the camp celebrate the creation of the state of Israel. They are sent to several repatriation camps, and are finally freed. The author bids farewell to Jakobovics, and teams up with Herschel Fixler and another Romanian for the next leg of his journey. They proceed to Bucharest in July 1948, to search for remaining family members. After much disappointment, they find the author's brother, Gershon.

Chapter 48: Symbol of Freedom

After a perilous journey, the author meets up with *B* in Budapest. They learn of the tragic death of the author's nephew in Israel. The author creates a new personal symbol of freedom, based on Margolis' calculation of the Jewish holidays. He and *B* begin a new life together.

Postscript: Ox-Laws

The author briefly recounts some of *B*'s experiences in a forced labour camp in the Karaganda Province of Soviet Central Asia.

A Note from the Translator

The translator discusses the reasons behind her desire to translate her late father's memoirs, and the steps involved in the translation.

Glossary of Words

Intended and Potential Markets

Basch writes in his introduction that when we think of the Holocaust, we consider only Germany, not Russia – a grave oversight. Unlike most other remembrance stories, *Under Stalin's Yoke* discusses the Soviets, not the Nazis, and exposes a different kind of injustice and brutality. Few people are aware of the catastrophic impact that the Soviets had, not only on Jews, but on much of the general population. Basch's experiences there were even worse than most, since he had the triple distinction of being a *dokhodiaga* (a "lazy" worker on starvation rations), a foreigner, and a Jew. Fellow prisoners persecuted him as much as the authorities did, and he spent most of his time in forced labour camps, isolated and shunned. All this offers a new perspective on what is already a largely overlooked portion of our history.

This book will appeal not only to survivors of persecution and their families, but will also interest the population at large. *Under Stalin's Yoke* is not just a dry factual stack of text. It contains action, adventure, drama, romance, humour, irony, slices of life, horror, outrage, and much, much more. It does what any good historical work seeks to do – it makes history come alive.

Illustrations

If deemed appropriate, illustrations may be supplied to highlight the most significant events occurring in the narrative. There should be approximately ten or fifteen of them, drawn in black and white in pencil and ink. The illustrations can be drawn by the author's granddaughter, Chantal Basch-Tétreault, who is currently studying Visual Arts at Dawson College in Montreal. Enclosed is a sample illustration for Chapter 29.

Photographs will be supplied.

A map should also be included. Enclosed is a draft map.

Following is a recommendation regarding the cover illustration:

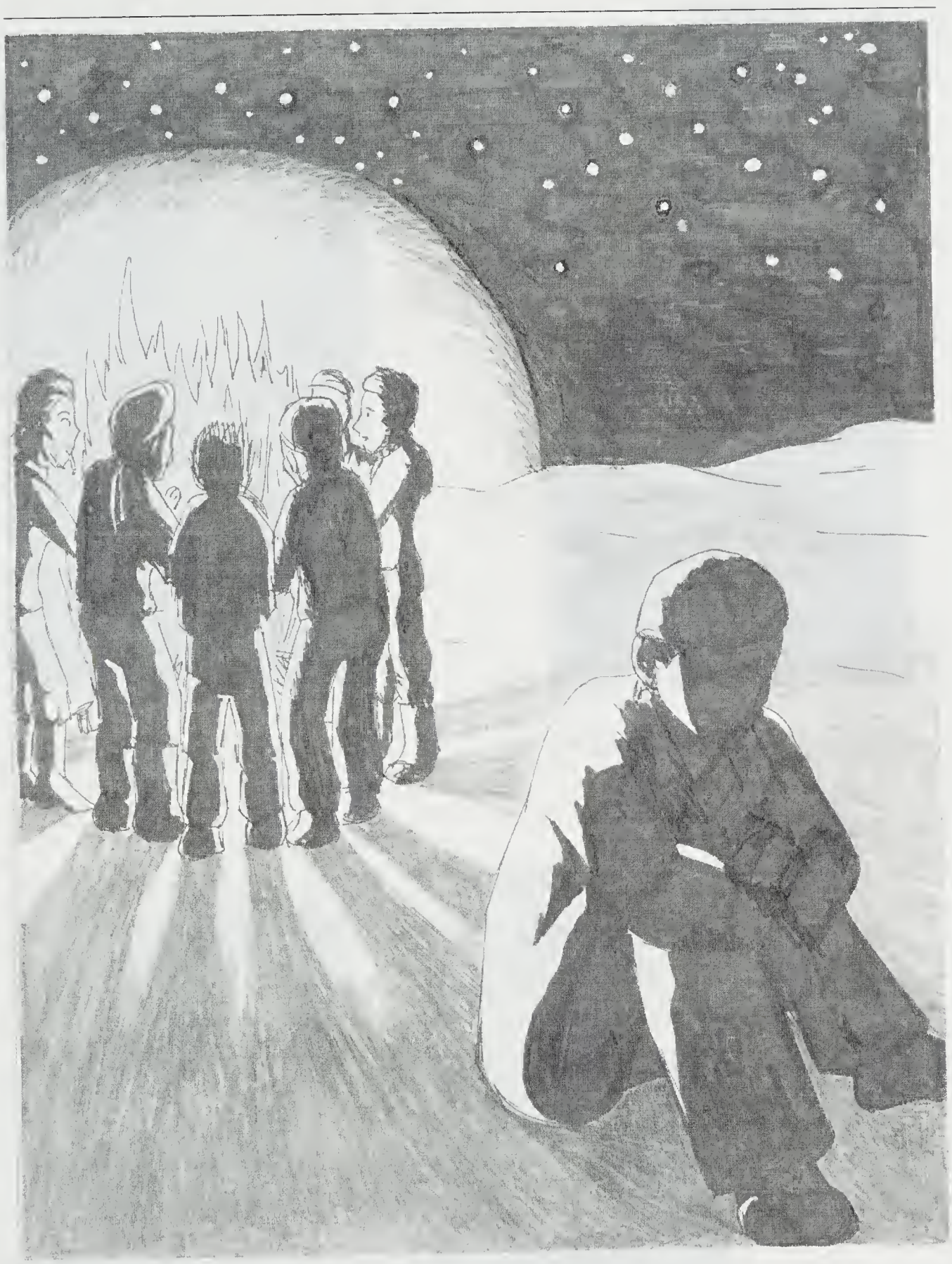
In Chapter 11, *They Trod on My Name*, the author poignantly describes how the NKVD desecrated his personal and religious articles. He was especially distressed to see how they manhandled his *t'fillin* (phylacteries) and the pouch in which they were kept. His mother had lovingly and painstakingly embroidered his name on the pouch in gold letters inside a gold Star of David. He later adds, "That was the last time in my life that I had the honour of seeing my name in gold letters..."

May I suggest that the cover page contain the author's name embossed in gold letters.

Draft Map

Pechora
Kotlas
Kirov
Gorky
Moscow
U. S. S. R.
Aktyubinsk
POLAND
Kiev
Kharkov
Lvov
Strij
Nadvornaya
Muncacz
Yasinya
Sighet
Belz
Starobelsk
Kishinev
Pascani
Bucharest
TURKEY
KOLA PENINSULA
ESTONIA
LATVIA
LITHUANIA
BULGARIA

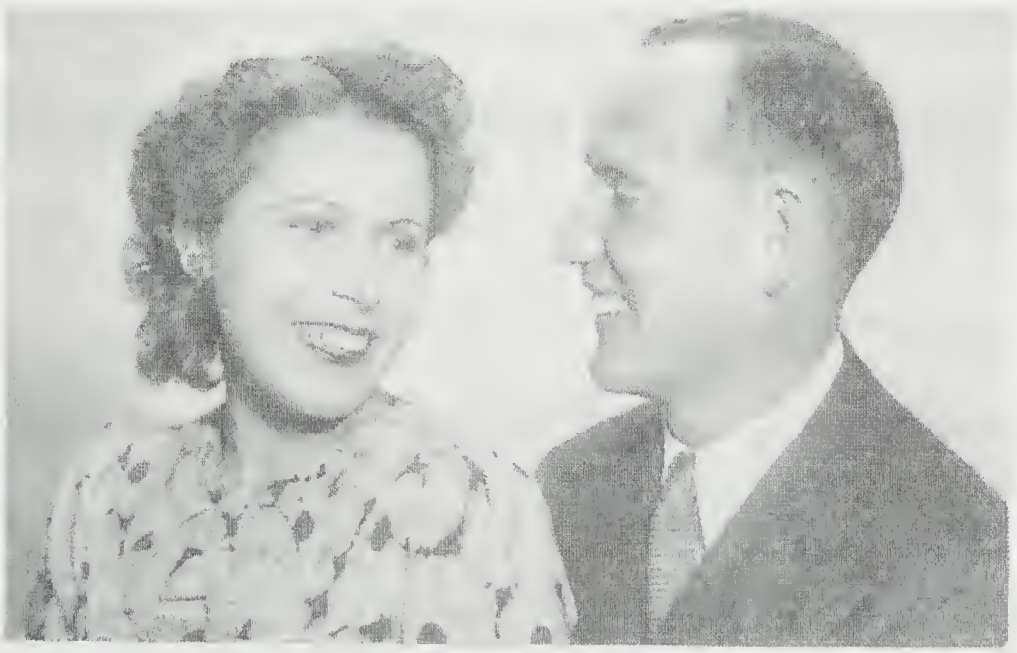
Sample illustration for Chapter 29 (pages 238-239)



Sample Photos

Eliezer in Sighet, circa 1935

Blanka (*B*) in Sighet, 1939



Blanka and Eliezer, Budapest, August 6, 1948

Biographical Sketches

The Author

Eliezer Basch, the author of *Under Stalin's Yoke*, was born in Sighet Romania in 1918 to a Hassidic family. The youngest of nine children, he was a brilliant scholar, who broke from the Hassidic tradition in his late teens to pursue secular studies. At the onset of World War II, he and his fiancée, Blanka Weiner, attempted to escape the Nazis by fleeing to the Soviet Union. They were immediately arrested and imprisoned for eight years. They miraculously survived, and – even more miraculously – managed in 1948 to find each other's whereabouts. After fleeing the Soviet Union, they were reunited and married and in 1949. They emigrated to Canada in 1950 and ultimately settled in Montreal, where they raised two children, Eva and Sheldon.

Eliezer Basch was intimately involved in the Montreal Jewish community. He was the Executive Director of the Farband Labour Zionist Organization for a number of years. He was an active member and long-time executive of the Jewish Public Library, as well as a regular contributor to the national Yiddish newspaper, *Keneder Adler*. He wrote *Farborgene Profiln* (Concealed Profiles), a collection of memoirs of his childhood, which he self-published in a limited edition in Yiddish in 1978. *Unter Stalin's Yokh* (Under Stalin's Yoke) was serialized in the *Keneder Adler* in the mid-sixties, and was self-published in a limited edition in 1980. Basch owned a small yarn

store in Montreal, and retired in 1990. In 1995, he passed away from a rare form of lymphatic cancer.

The Translator

Eva Basch, the translator of *Under Stalin's Yoke*, is a resident of Montreal. The mother of two deaf children, she currently works as an oral interpreter for the deaf at the post-secondary level. Actively involved in promoting the rights of the deaf, she headed the lobby group *Interpret-Accès* in 1990-91, which fought for the rights of all deaf people in Quebec to have access to educational interpreting. A former teacher of English as a second language, she has trained virtually all the oral interpreters currently working in Montreal. She graduated from Herzliah High School in 1966, fluent in Hebrew. In 1970, she obtained her Bachelor of Arts degree from McGill University, with a major in French and English literature. She has written and edited numerous business and educational documents, and has contributed articles on deafness and interpreting to a number of publications. She has also done several translations from French to English. *Under Stalin's Yoke* is her first Yiddish – English translation.

The Illustrator

Chantal Basch-Tétreault, the author's granddaughter, is currently studying visual arts at Dawson College in Montreal. A self-taught artist with very little formal training, Chantal has a distinctive style, which is partly influenced by cartoon art. The medium for her illustrations is pencil and ink fine-tuned with the help of computer graphics. The drawings are meant to reflect on the most striking or memorable scenes and events in the book, and enhance what was written in the text. They represent her personal response to her grandparents' experiences in the Soviet gulag.

Under Stalin's Yoke

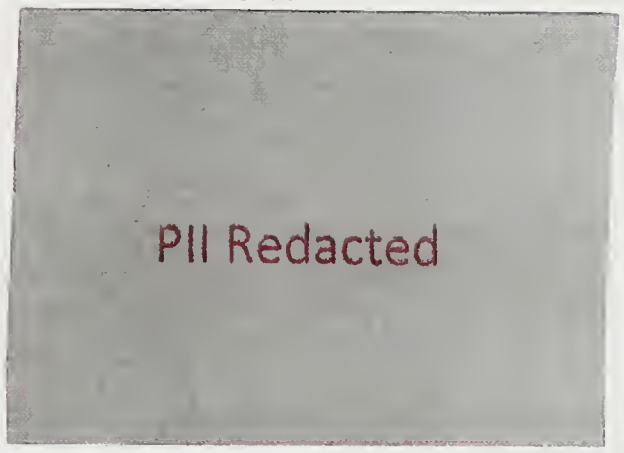
by

Eliezer Basch

Translated from the original Yiddish by Eva Basch

With the assistance of Sara Rosenfeld

Eva Basch



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110,000 words

© Eva Basch April 2002

I dedicate this book to Blanka and to our children, Eva and Sheldon.

Eliezer Basch

Not allowing oneself to be harnessed by a yoke is easier than breaking it later.

- *Yiddish proverb*

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A Note from the Translator

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my gratitude to those who made possible the publication of this translation.

First and foremost, I dedicate this English version of *Under Stalin's Yoke* to my late father, Eliezer Basch. I regret deeply that he did not have the opportunity to see his work published in English during his lifetime.

I also dedicate this translation to my mother, Blanka Weiner Basch.

I wish especially to thank Sara Rosenfeld from the bottom of my heart. Without her excellent knowledge of Yiddish and her insight into the historical and cultural context of the original, this work could never have been translated into English.

Thanks to my husband, Marcel, for his wonderful support, and for tolerating a messy house, leftover meals and an absent wife, as I made my nocturnal forays into the office and slogged away on the computer.

I wish to thank my daughter, Chantal, for editing and giving me feedback on my work throughout each stage of the translation process. She has created the lovely cover design and the drawings interspersed throughout the book. The illustrations represent her

personal response to her grandparents' experiences. *Under Stalin's Yoke* is truly a family affair that spans three generations!

The internet was an invaluable tool as well. I am particularly grateful to Elena Dzhima, a volunteer from AllExperts.com, who spent many hours helping me refine the many Russian terms and ensure that the transliterations and definitions were accurate.

I also want to express my appreciation to Elie Wiesel, Faye Sholiton, Shelly Schreter, Kim Lee and David Roskies for their valuable advice and support.

- Eva Basch, Montreal, 2002

Author's Foreword

We have become accustomed to the word *Shoah* ('Holocaust') as a reference to the destruction of European Jewry during the time of Hitler, cursed be his name and memory. When one hears the phrase *those who perished in the Holocaust*, what normally comes to mind is the image of six million Jewish victims murdered by the Nazis during the Second World War.

I am not sure whether the figure of six million also includes the tens of thousands of Jewish victims who died in Soviet jails, prison colonies and concentration camps during the time of Stalin, may his name and memory be cursed. By *Stalin's victims* I am referring to Jewish refugees who sought protection from Hitler's persecution by escaping to the USSR.

In my humble opinion, it would be a grave injustice not to include, among the casualties of the Holocaust, the unfortunate souls who perished as prisoners of the Soviets. *Stalin's victims are as much Jewish martyrs as Hitler's victims.* Their only 'sin' was to wish to survive and escape the Nazis, but they were nonetheless fated to perish under the Communists.

The surviving refugees who suffered for years under Stalin's yoke have serious grievances against the Soviet government. They were tortured even more severely than murderers, gangsters and true criminals, although they were wholly innocent of any crime. **Why?!**

Jeremiah the prophet wailed in Lamentations 3,1, *I am the man that hath seen affliction by the rod of His wrath*, as if he alone had lived through the painful anguish of the Diaspora. I, too, am a witness, living proof of cruel deeds, in this case those perpetrated by the Soviet regime upon Jewish refugees.

Therefore, I would like to widen the expression of the term 'Holocaust' to also include those who suffered and died in Soviet concentration camps exclusively because of their Jewish heritage. Hitler and Stalin, both enemies of the Jews, as well as all their accomplices, should be equally accused of genocide. They should all be condemned with one common curse. May their evil names rot, and may they be erased from memory forever!

- **Eliezer Basch**

Introduction - I Had a Dream

On a stone wall in one of the cells of the Soviet prison in the city of Stanislav, is an inscription etched in crude Yiddish characters:

"I had a dream! I, Moshe ben Haïm, am a perebezchik, an escapee. It serves me right. It's all my own fault!"

Inmates of this Russian prison needed no explanation of the bitter irony of these words. To those that could read Yiddish, the meaning of that message was crystal clear. They understood immediately that it was written by a man who had imagined that he could sneak into Paradise through a Russian door. And since his much-desired Heaven turned out to be such Hell, he took revenge upon the one who brought him to this wretched state:

*"**It serves me right. It's all my own fault!"***

I, too, had a dream. I, together with many other naïve idealists of my time, imagined that I could escape from Fascist hell to Proletarian heaven. Oh, with what speed and bitterness were we divested of our illusions!

On the following pages, I shall attempt to tell the story of my survival in the Soviet Union during the Second World War. Of course, my experience was not unique. A good number of youths who traveled the same road as I were waylaid, and for their 'dream' they paid the highest price – their lives! Fortunately I was one of the lucky ones for whom this foolishness paid off.

Chapter 1 - God's Imperfect Little World

Gloriously encircled by water and majestically surrounded by mountains lies the genuine Jewish *shtetl* of Sighet – Maramures Sighet.

In many ways, the Lord of the Universe seemed to have overlooked this little town. But when springtime came to God's imperfect little world, He did not fail to grant her some portion of His wondrous bounty. Every spring, one could hear the sharp cry of the cuckoo birds in the morning and the sweet trills of the warblers in the evening. From the peaks of the Carpathian Solovan Mountains, Romanian peasants would yodel a *doina,* while the Hungarians would beat out a *czardas* on their cymbals. From high atop the mountains, gurgling rivulets would snake their way thinly into the Isza River, dancing and slithering as they gained in momentum and were rocked on her waves to her bigger sister, the Tisza.

The year 1940 saw no change in the countryside surrounding Sighet. The birds sang, the rivers flowed, and the sun continued to warm and flood the surrounding area with its light. The songs and music of the Romanians and the Hungarians echoed as usual in the mountains.

Not so joyous, however, was the mood in Jewish households. There was almost no Jewish home in the village that did not have a father or son absent from the Sabbath table. The men were all mobilized into the Romanian army – an army that had never been very friendly to Jews to start with, all the less so now, with the tense political situation in the country. How could the Sabbath be celebrated in a Jewish home with the head of the family missing? The *khallah* and the wine lay on the table, as if abandoned, ashamed that there was nobody to recite the ritual blessings.

After Russia occupied the Romanian territories of Bessarabia and North Bukovina in June of 1940, propaganda began to appear in one section of the Romanian press – propaganda feeding off the hate-filled Nazi newspaper *Der Stürmer*: *The treacherous Jews have brought about a national tragedy. Those traitors have sold Bessarabia and Bukovina to the Russians - the Communists!*

In view of this hate propaganda, it was natural that some members of the Jewish community became frightened, lest the Romanian government use the current situation to justify inciting a mob to lash out at the innocent Jewish population.

Not without reason, therefore, did the Jews of Sighet begin to feel an uncertain envy of their brethren in Bessarabia and Bukovina. They began whispering amongst themselves on street corners. One fellow muttered, "The Jews *on the other side* will soon be saying the blessing on *red* wine."

Somebody else, overhearing this remark, and guessing its meaning, disagreed. "Nonsense!" he exclaimed. "The streets aren't flowing with honey over there either."

"Well, even if they don't have it so great," retorted the first fellow, "at least they enjoy equality in misery with non-Jews."

"Yeah, he's right," interjected a third. "Over there, if someone insults a Jew and calls him a *Zhid,* he gets punished, because it's against the Soviet constitution. But here, a Jewish life isn't worth a pinch of snuff!"

That was how Jews talked among themselves. Even those who had previously had doubts about Communism began to look at it in a different light. Even those who had once equated the term *Bolshevik* with *bandit*, *outcast* and *troublemaker,* began to change their minds. They had to admit that a society where Jews were not oppressed due to their religious and ethnic origin could not be all that bad, despite its other problems.

One fellow, a Communist, excitedly set out to tear apart everybody's arguments. "Now you come to your senses?" he lashed out. "Now when the knife is at your throats? Where were you before, when we warned you and argued that something had to be done? Where were you then?"

Who knows how such discussions would have ended, if not for the police. Angry police officers regularly patrolled public areas, roughly brandishing their plaited whips. "These are exceptional times, and the whole country is mobilizing for war," they shouted, as they dispersed the group. "There are laws against congregating in public."

Scarcely a few months after Russia had occupied Bessarabia and Bukovina, the Romanian government was forced to hand over the northern half of Transylvania – including Sighet – to the Hungarians.

Chapter 2 - Fawning Jackals

In the political and diplomatic jungle, Hungary played the role of lapdog to the larger beasts – Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. For her support of their grandiose territorial appetites, Hungary was allowed to seize all of Carpathian Russia from Czechoslovakia and half of Transylvania from Romania.

The Lilliputian country of Hungary had had the good fortune to win one victory after another without shedding a drop of blood. It would have been proper that she deal respectfully with the minorities from the occupied territories.

But not Hungary!

The Magyars treated the Romanians and the Ukrainians with contemptuous disdain, but they outdid themselves in their expressions of hatred towards the Jews. Like fawning jackals, they set out to prove to Hitler and Mussolini that they were no less diligent in their anti-Semitism than any of the other Fascist adherents.

When the Romanians left and the Hungarians took over, the Transylvanian Jews now under Hungarian control mistakenly believed that all would be well. They were like invalids who are convinced that a cure is imminent, as long as they are moved to another bed.

Most of the older generation of Jews consoled themselves with false illusions, since they remembered the good times under the kingdom of the Austro-Hungarian monarch, Franz Josef, whom they rightfully called 'the benevolent king.' After having endured ups and downs for twenty-two years under the heavy yoke of Romanian anti-Semites, they hoped that the new Hungarian regime would not show as much malice as the Romanians had recently demonstrated.

The older generation held onto a strong belief that it was impossible for such civilized Hungarians to turn into diabolical and sadistic brutes. They could not imagine that an entire people could suddenly become chauvinistic enough to transform from angels into devils.[1]

According to the agreement signed in Vienna on the initiative of the foreign ministers of Germany and Italy, Ribentropp and Ciana, the Romanians had to leave Sighet by the 4th of September 1940. Sighet was situated right on the border. The Tisza River had for the last two years divided Romania from Czechoslovakia, and since Hungary had marched in after Czechoslovakia fell, the Tisza now became the border between Romania and Hungary. According to the Vienna award, the Hungarian army would pass through Sighet first, and would then go on to occupy the rest of Northern Transylvania.

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1 The original Yiddish text states, 'They could not imagine that an entire people could suddenly become so chauvinistic as to be transformed from *Sanegorim* into *Kategorim.*' In Jewish tradition, before the High Holidays, each person is inscribed in the Book of Life or Death. It is the *Sanegor* (defence attorney) who is the angel who pleads on behalf of sparing each individual's life; the *Kategor* (prosecuting attorney) puts forth arguments in favor of condemning him to death.

It was the last day of Romanian occupation, and the tiny provincial railroad station was overflowing with an unruly mob of people jostling to squeeze onto the platform or tear themselves out into the street.

"*Hei! Misca-te*! Get a move on!" barked an officer to a common soldier.

There was an obvious deterioration of discipline among the Romanian lower ranks. When given an order, soldiers no longer responded with the usual military respect by replying "*Ordonați domnu ofițer!* At your command, sir!" By this point, one could hardly tell the difference between officers and enlisted men. They all looked haggard and lethargic. Their shoulders were burdened with guns, blankets, and wooden suitcases filled with provisions, dishes, utensils and other assorted baggage.

The Romanian military scurried around like poisoned rats. Uniformed men pushed and shoved their way onto the platform. Officers arrogantly elbowed anyone in their way, in a futile attempt to create some order in the few remaining minutes before the last transport left town. Amidst all this turmoil, one would think that the Romanian officers were too busy for anything but their immediate duty. Not at all.

Some officers from the extreme anti-Semitic Iron Guard would have been broken-hearted if they had left without bestowing a fond farewell upon Sighet's Jewish population. Moments before their departure, they jumped from their railway cars and began to beat up the few Jews that they were able to single out in the crowd.

The Jews of Sighet were never known to submit meekly to anti-Semitic attacks. During the 1930's, when disciples of the notorious Professor Cuza[2] attempted to stage pogroms in Sighet similar to those they had successfully carried out in other parts of the country, their attempts were thwarted; the residents of Sighet would not allow themselves to be victimized.

Likewise now, Jews did not stand quietly on the platform and wait to be assaulted. Since it was obvious that the Romanians were no longer the masters there, why should the Jews be afraid of them? In the blink of an eye, as soon as they noticed their brethren under attack, the Jews in the railway station began to fight back. Like a group of organized partisans, they trounced the anti-Semitic hooligans who had attempted to beat them up.

It is anyone's guess as to how that fight would have ended had it not been cut short by the blast of the locomotive's whistle. The conductor shouted, for the last time in Romanian, "*Intrațe in vagone!* All aboard!"

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2 Cuza, professor of political economy and founder of the National Democratic Party, was undisputedly Romania's most radical intellectual anti-Semite. His party's program called for the total elimination of Jewish influence from the social, economic, cultural, military, and political life of Rumania.

Chapter 3 - The Madman Knows

The following morning, Thursday September 5, the Hungarians began their passage across the Tisza, via the Slotvina-Sighet Bridge.

For twelve days and twelve nights, the villagers' ears were assailed by the constant clippety-clop of cavalry horses trotting on cobblestones, the squeaky rolling of wagons and the dull percussion of marching feet to the accompaniment of beating drums. The Magyar military bands shrilled in the air and ravaged the eardrums. It felt to the villagers as if they were suffering from an intense hangover. In retrospect, the old Romanian music didn't sound so bad after all...

The local Magyars came out with freshly washed, smiling faces, in their finest clothes, their cowlicks glistening, and enthusiastically greeted their *Vitézes*, their Heroes. This title, no less, did the Magyar military accord themselves. The only form of address permitted when speaking to a common soldier was 'Sir Hero.'

The Magyars carried bouquets of flowers in their arms, and humbly offered them to the officers. The crowd cheered and screamed ecstatically, "Hurrah Hurrah! Long live Horthy Miklos! Long live the Hungarian Heroes! Long live the Hungarian government! Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!"

Moshe-Leib, the poor local nitwit, was as excited as the Magyars. He ran wildly about the town, shrieking in Yiddish, "Hurrah! Hurrah! Long live Horthy Miklos! Oh, Lord of the Universe, may he rot in hell for my sake and for the sake of the entire Jewish nation! Hurrah!"

Moshe-Leib screamed with such ecstasy and fervour that he sounded like a staunch Magyar patriot. The Hungarians were intrigued, yet suspicious, as to why *he* was so enthusiastic about the Hungarian takeover, when all of the other Jews clearly were not. The local Jews were fearful that this madman's outburst would provoke a serious incident. They were afraid that the Magyars would accuse them of inciting Moshe-Leib to shout seditious tirades. They tried to quiet him, to no avail.

Moshe-Leib continued to shriek, "Jews run! Run for your lives! Run to the ends of the earth! Can't you see the evil clearly written all over their faces? Can't you see that devils have overpowered us? Can't you see that this is the beginning of tragedy and disaster for us Jews? Long live Horthy Miklos! Cursed be his name and memory! Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!"

A passing Hungarian policeman demanded that someone translate Moshe-Leib's rantings.

"Who pays attention to the chattering of a madman?" hastily replied several Jews.

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Despite the bright, sunny morning, Jewish hearts were heavy. They could read the sadness in one another's eyes.

The Romanian greeting, "*Buna dimineaţa"* could no longer be heard. It was replaced by the Hungarian salutation, "*Yo regelt, yo regelt*. Good day."

"It's no *yo regelt for* us," groaned the Jews.

Melancholy music played on the Romanian radio stations. There were constant announcements that Romania had proclaimed a period of national mourning because of the loss of half of the Transylvanian territory to Hungary. On the other hand, the Hungarian radio broadcast lively, jubilant music, regularly interrupted by proclamations that Hungarians were celebrating a great national holiday. On the streets, the Magyars congratulated themselves. They hugged and kissed each other on the lips. Former enemies became friends. They revelled and danced and drank and caroused until they fell down dead drunk.

The Jewish population remained mostly indifferent to both the sorrow of the Romanians and the jubilation of the Magyars. Jews still under Romanian control were certainly not in an enviable position. But as the future would show, the Hungarian Jews were doomed.

The Magyars barely had a chance to cross over the old border and set their paws on Sighet's soil, the first area of Northern Transylvania to be occupied, before the Hungarian *Heroes* began to demonstrate their courage. The first task these brave soldiers set upon themselves was to show the Jews some gracious hospitality.

In shtetls like Sighet, as throughout Maramures, the Hungarians didn't have to look too hard to find a Jewish person. They would then proceed to seize him and chop off one of his earlocks or cut off half of his beard. Even those with neither earlocks nor

beards were not spared. The Magyars had generous honours to bestow left and right on every Jew.

And that was only their initial welcome – the first of many. Even former supporters of the new government began to shake off their false illusions. Quite soon, these Jewish Hungarian patriots realized that they had gone from the frying pan into the fire: Yesterday it was the *Walachians*, the Romanians, who beat up the Jews; today it was the Magyars. In the meantime, it was difficult to figure out which of the two butchers was the greater enemy. Who was the more sinister evil – the former master, or the current one? One didn't have to be particularly well versed in politics to realize that both regimes were knitted from the same cloth. Both the Magyars and the Walachians were crawling with the vermin of Fascism and consumed by the poison of Nazi anti-Semitism. Both deserved to be damned with a thousand curses.

The situation got worse from day to day. Jews were not allowed to leave the shtetl without authorization. No new work permits were granted to educated young people. Licenses to sell tobacco, bread, beverages and other necessities were taken away from Jews and given to Hungarians. In general, Jews were robbed of the main sources of their livelihood. Some were arrested without any justification. The first victim was a respected Jew, ironically, a former Hungarian patriot, by the name of Moishe'le Moskovitch. The Magyars arrested Moishe'le for no apparent reason. They probably tortured him, because within a few days he passed away in the Sighet jail.

It quickly became obvious that it bothered the Magyars not at all to show their contempt for well-to-do Jews. With no justification whatsoever, they arrested two

prominent Jewish gentlemen, Mr. Ansel Mendelovich and Mr. Gandor Stern, and proceeded to extort huge sums of money from them.

Every day – sometimes twice or three times a day – a crier would march through the town, stop at each street corner, and beat on a little drum. He would wait for a crowd to gather, and then would call out, in a booming voice, all the latest repressions awaiting the Jewish population:

- All Jews, without exception, must take off their hats when the Hungarian national anthem is played. Failure to comply will be heavily punished.

- All Jews aged twenty to twenty-two will shortly receive an invitation to appear at the *Munkas-Szolgálat*, the working battalions created especially for Jews.

- Owners of inns, bakeries, confectionery stores, pharmacies and other retail outlets will have to hand over their shops to Hungarian veterans.

Even the youngest gentile children were encouraged to commit vicious acts of hooliganism. They threw stones at old, weak Jews. They broke synagogue windows. They tossed rocks into Jewish homes, occasionally injuring occupants within.

Jews, ever-faithful followers of the media, avidly devoured the Hungarian newspapers in the hope of detecting a glimmer of good news between the lines. But, not surprisingly, their hopes were dashed. The Hungarian press was loathsome. It was as replete with anti-Semitism as a pomegranate is with kernels – poisoned kernels full of venom and hatred. The Nuremberg Laws, recently adopted in Fascist Germany, became the daily theme in the papers. It was obvious from the way these decrees were discussed

and promoted in the press that many Hungarians would have been delighted to see their government ratify the Nuremberg Laws as soon as possible.

Under these circumstances, it was not difficult to ascertain that the real troubles were just beginning.

Unable to find consolation during these perilous times, many Jews fasted. They went to the cemetery to ask the righteous departed to intercede on behalf of the children of Israel. They assembled regularly in synagogues to hear words of encouragement and to sing psalms together. When they got to verse 22, *My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?* the whole congregation became agitated and full of exaltation. Now more than ever, Jews prayed fervently, with devotion and humility. They asked the Lord to spare them from this terrible plight. It was the first day of *Elul*,[3] the time of year when the celestial gates of compassion are open. They felt that that now their supplications would be heard, and would be included in the entourage of prayers ascending heavenwards.

Indeed, both generations of Jews, old as well as young, were becoming more and more convinced that the Hungarians now represented a far greater evil than the Romanians ever had.

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3 Elul, the month preceding *Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur*, which are the holiest days of the Jewish calendar.

Chapter 4 - Cheating Death

The Romanians had to leave Sighet and the Maramures region, and clear out of the area by the fourth or the fifth of September 1940, at the very latest. Over the following twelve-day period, the Romanian military would be required to leave the territory of Northern Transylvania entirely. During that time, a small stretch of the border remained unpatrolled. As of the year 1939, when both Germany and Russia occupied Poland,[4] the former Romanian-Polish border of Galicia became the Romanian-Soviet border. And that border was now a no-man's land, without guards. The Romanian *graniceri*[5] were no longer in place, and the Hungarian *hatar-örsheg* had not yet appeared to assume their posts.

So, if the Soviet border was only patrolled on one side, on the Soviet side, then why shouldn't those who had once dreamed of a Communist paradise take advantage of such a marvellous opportunity? Sneaking across the border into Soviet heaven would be akin to cheating death.

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4 On September 1, German forces invaded Poland on three fronts: East Prussia in the north, Germany in the west and Slovakia in the south. On September 17, Soviet forces invaded from the east.
5 *Graniceri, hatar-örsheg, pogranichniks*: Romanian, Hungarian, and Russian border patrols, respectively.

This opportunity electrified the fantasies of many young people from Maramures and Transylvania. If someone, somewhere, somehow, wanted to go there, now was the best time.

And they certainly didn't have to be afraid of the Soviet *pogranichniks*. If the Romanian and the Hungarian border watchmen were agents of destruction, then the Russian border guards were certainly true angels of peace. That was the only logical explanation in this topsy-turvy world. The first people to run to the border were youths – boys and girls. Newlyweds joined the groups on a smaller scale. There were also married couples, with or without children, together with middle-aged and older men, Christians as well as Jews. Of course, there were many more Jews than Christians, since the Jews were trying to save themselves from an anti-Semitic inferno.

Some married couples had decided that the husbands should be the first to flee to Russia, and if all went well, they would send for their loved ones. Not many of those runaways gave much thought to what would happen beyond their escape. Indeed, very few could have imagined that after this venture, they would never see their loved ones again. What a dreadful decision they were forced to make!

There just wasn't enough time.

Those who chose to flee had to rid their hearts of all sentiment. "If you're scared or worried, just go back home," decisive individuals told doubters. They justified their decision by asserting, "What have we got to lose? There's nothing but grief for us here. The writing's on the wall, and we're already getting a taste of what's in store for us, with those Fascist Magyar hooligans in charge."

Young people, who were of the age to be mobilized and sent to the special Jewish work battalions, the *Munkas-Szolgálat*, were especially frantic about their fate. They knew that the conditions there were even worse than in prison. They hated the Fascist Hungarian regime. Why should they enlist voluntarily, when doing so meant being forced into slavery? It would be like kissing the stick that beat them. Many of the young people who first thought about crossing the Soviet border were active Communists. They were aware that this was a criminal act, against their Communist principles. As devoted comrades, they should stay where they were, and fight to further the revolution of the working masses. The class struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie would be better fought in the corrupt system they were currently in, rather than in a society where the revolution of the working class was already a *fait accompli*. Yet, many Communists, captives of their own agitation and propaganda, could not resist the temptation to run away to the Soviet Utopia.

In truth, most of these would-be escapees believed that if they were indeed committing a crime, it was only against Fascist Hungary, and certainly not against the Soviet Union.

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Personally, I was not among the first group of escapees who seized the opportunity to cross the Sambatyon,6 as some Jews called the Soviet border.

From the outset, I felt an aversion to such an act. But after two months under the

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6 Sambatyon: the legendary impassable river of rocks, behind which, according to Jewish lore, the ten lost tribes of Israel live.

new regime, something happened to convince me that my only option was to flee.

I had never been a Communist, nor had I ever taken part in Communist activities. However, under the circumstances, like many of my peers, I identified more with Communism than with the ruling Fascist administration. For the most part, I was not particularly interested in world politics. I had been an activist in Zionist circles, starting out as a member of the *Agudah*, then the *Mizrachi*, and in 1940, in the *Hashomer Hatzair*.[7] Communist propaganda did not really appeal to me. On the contrary, I felt a strong distaste towards some active comrades who wanted to create the impression that they were the only heroes willing to sacrifice themselves for Jewish interests. The signing of the treaty between Molotov and Ribentropp[8] was, for me, indisputable proof that Communist words were merely bombastic propaganda and demagoguery.

Many youths were snared into the net of Communist indoctrination, which deceived them into believing that Russia was heaven on earth. The adverse political and economic situation in Northern Transylvania gave rise to a climate that nourished this propaganda. Even those in religious circles were beginning to believe that, under these circumstances, their only salvation could come from Communism. How were they to know that the Soviet regime was diametrically opposed to Jewish welfare?

A large number of young people who belonged to Zionist associations organized themselves into secret defence groups. In fact, all Zionist organizations were part of the

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7 *Agudah*: Ultra orthodox religious group, *Mizrachi*: Zionist religious group. *Hashomer Hatzair*: Secular socialist Zionist group.

8 In 1940, under the terms of the Molotov-Ribentropp Pact, Romania lost Bessarabia and Bukovina in favour of the USSR. Romania was also forced to give the northern part of Transylvania to Hungary.

underground, since the Magyars had proclaimed Zionism illegal. The resistance groups had only one goal: to be watchful and protect Jewish interests. That was a lot to bear in mind, more than enough to keep them busy. They guarded the synagogues, were on the lookout for thugs attempting to harass Jews, and tried to defend themselves against any new decrees. On many occasions, they were successful in teaching the Magyar hooligans a lesson. They struck swiftly and silently, and left the scene quickly.

I, too, was a member of a defence group. My pal, Itzik Baer Junger, and I were involved in an act that put us in grave jeopardy. What could we do? Where could we hide? The Magyar police would surely arrest us and torture us to death, unless we revealed the names of our co-conspirators. Without a doubt, if we had had the option, we would have escaped from Hungary to the Holy Land, or to any other country that could offer us a safe haven. But how could we have gone to Palestine? It wasn't as if it were next door!

I was already terrified about joining the Jewish work battalion, and now I had this latest danger facing me. What could I do? It was then that I came up with the idea of escaping to Russia, as others had been doing for the past two months. I felt as if I had nothing to lose. And in my young and naïve mind, I thought that the world was coming to an end, and that the best solution for my poor parents and me would be for me to run away as soon as possible.

Chapter 5 - All Mixed Up

I was born and raised in a very devout, Hassidic home. By the age of ten, I had already received leftovers[9] from several distinguished Rabbis. My father wanted me to learn the first part of the Talmudic tractate of *Yoreh De'ah* off by heart and become a religious teacher. I was the youngest of nine children,[10] and my father had pinned his hopes on me. His dream was to have a son who would become a rabbi or a judge in a religious court. At the beginning, it looked as if my father's wishes would be fulfilled. I took to *Hilchot M'licha* and *Bassar V'chalav* like a fish to water, but later, when I got to *Ta'arovot,* the third part of the first section of *Yoreh De'ah*, I started to get all confused. (Incidentally, the word *Ta'arovot* means 'mixed up.') Instead of advancing from strength to strength, higher and higher in my learning, I was sinking lower and lower. Later I asked myself the Cabalistic question: *Why, oh why does the soul descend from the highest spheres down to the depths?*

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9 Leftovers (Hebrew: *Shirayim*) Remnants of a rabbi's food, of which Hasidim partake as a matter of honour. To partake in even a small morsel, or any sort of leftover, was reserved for brilliant and devout scholars.

10 Translator's note: The author had four sisters and four brothers. By 1940, two brothers and two sisters had moved overseas: Isaac to the United States, Goldie and Arthur to Canada, and Shari to Cuba. The four others had moved away from Sighet , but remained in Europe. His two eldest sisters, Malka and Tsirl, perished in the Holocaust. His brother, Gershon was living in Bucharest, and immigrated to Israel after the war. Shmuel (Shandor), the remaining brother, was in Budapest, and immigrated to Canada after the war.

My parents' hopes of experiencing gratification[11] from their youngest child had been dashed. Their delightful midsummer night's dream had turned into an unpleasant nightmare. I had let them down.

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I was in a serious predicament. I didn't know what to do.

My main concern at the moment was to avoid causing distress to my mother and father. I asked myself what would give them the least aggravation. If I were to remain at home in Sighet, I would surely be arrested sooner or later by the Magyars, which would be a severe blow to my parents. But how could I tell them about my secret love, which they knew nothing about? What should I do?

Maybe I should just run away as if there were no tomorrow? But, then, what should I do with the girl whom I loved, and to whom I had sworn everlasting devotion?

This girl, let's call her *B*, had a sick mother. Would she want to leave her ailing mother and come with me?

I had already resolved to cross the border, and had made all the necessary arrangements. Yet all these conflicting thoughts and emotions were swirling around in my brain.

As it turned out, *B* had told her parents about us. They were modern people who understood her dilemma, and did not want to stand in her way. They cared only about their daughter's welfare, and would not try to prevent her from doing what she felt was

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11 The Yiddish term is *nakhes,* the special feeling of pride, enjoyment and gratification parents experience when their children are doing well.

best. Whether they truly approved or not, they gave their permission for *B* to run away with me.

As I took my leave of *B*'s parents, I cheerfully told them, "Don't be afraid. Nothing will happen to your daughter. God willing, you will enjoy fulfilment from her."

"Take care of her," *B*'s mother pleaded from her sickbed. "Look after her. She's the apple of my eye."

When we left the house, I reminded *B*, "Don't forget, my dear, that we have to meet at the train station at five o'clock on the dot. Exactly five o'clock!"

We kissed and gazed at each other as if we were to be separated for a long time. I then hurried home.

Chapter 6 - God Will Help You

Now I had to break the news to my parents.

I still recalled vividly the mood in our home when my two older sisters and two older brothers left for America, the Golden Land. I was quite young when that took place, but even now the painful taste of grief that I had lived through with my parents still remained with me. One can never truly forget the trauma of such parting scenes. How many tears had been shed, in solitude, before their children left and again after they were gone; and how many prayers had been uttered for their well-being!

My eight brothers and sisters were already married, and only I, the ninth, lived at home. How could I just come in and suddenly announce that I was leaving?

It was a late autumn day in 1940. There was such a fierce snowstorm blowing outside that it would have been a crime to let a dog out. The Tisza and the Isza, the rivers that surrounded the shtetl, stormed and roared like bloodthirsty animals, ready to swallow all of Sighet. Clouds hung like heavy balloons, about to explode. It appeared as if they would burst and angrily discharge their burden, heavy with burning wrath across the land, as had happened before in Sodom and Gomorrah – although at least in Sighet there were many virtuous Jews, whose righteousness would have nullified any such decree.

I came into the house. My father was, as usual, absorbed in a holy book. My mother was looking over the newly washed laundry to see if a button was missing on a shirt or if a hem needed mending. The house was in semi-darkness; we had to save as much light as possible. I sneaked into the house, almost like a thief. My parents hardly noticed me. My father, engrossed in his book, wrinkled his brow and stroked his long white beard. My mother whispered a prayer.

I was in a predicament, and I didn't know how to start. Somehow, my mother sensed my distress. "Nice weather outside, isn't it?" she exclaimed. Why are you standing there like a beggar? You look like you don't know if you're coming or going."

In the meantime, she approached my father and expressed her concern. "Take a look at him – he's soaked through and through."

In the same tone of voice she told me, "Take off your jacket and make yourself at home."

"Yes, Mama. I agree with you," I replied. "The weather is terrible outside. Actually, it's a very bad time altogether."

I took my jacket off slowly, and tried to screw up the courage to continue. "For me, and for all the other young Jews in Hungary, it's even worse. Pretty soon we'll have to go and enlist in the work battalion. I've spoken to some guys who've been there, and they tell me it's terrible. They're miserable. The officers harass Jews all the time. It's like Hell. I don't know how I'll be able to get out of going to that horrible place."

"God will help you," consoled my mother. Despite her sorrow, she tried to put some encouragement and liveliness into her voice. "Wait and see, my child. God did not desert the Jews in the past, and He won't desert us now. You'll see."

Now my father joined in the conversation, even though he had to interrupt his studying. "You question the fact that our God is great?" My father spoke more persuasively and more loudly than my mother. "Nothing happens in this world without the will of God. Not even a leaf on a tree can move without His bidding. Even if there is a sharp sword at your throat, you should never give up, because God will save you! Our sages, may they rest in peace, said *Kol ma da'avid rakhmana l'tov avid*, which means, *We must accept everything with love.*"

"Father," I stammered, my voice barely audible. "Father, I see that you're studying this week's Torah portion, *Lekh L'khah*?"

"Yes, my son," my father replied. "Now I'm learning *Khack L'Yisroel* for Day 1,[12] The Lord said to Abraham our forefather, may he rest in peace, *Get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee.* You see my son, our father Abraham had to live through all sorts of hardships, and he withstood them all. As our sages, may they rest in peace, said in *Pirkei Avot,*[13] *Abraham was tested with ten trials, and he endured them all.*"

"Yes, my dear parents. I'm also in a position where I have to face a harsh trial, no less severe than Abraham's."

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12 *Khack L'Yisroel Hu*, From Psalm 81:5. Literally 'a law unto Israel,' a book of extracts from the Bible, Talmud and Zohar for daily study. 'Day 1' would refer to the Sunday reading.
13 *Pirkei Avot*: A section of the *Mishnah* dealing with ethical principles

With all the strength in my being, I finally unburdened my aching soul. "My dear parents, today I will have to undergo the trial of *Lekh L'khah*."

I then explained why I had to leave, and why there was no other alternative.

That's when the real lamentations started. My mother began weeping and wailing, but when she saw that her crying was only aggravating the situation, she tried to control herself for a while. Thereupon, she started to pack things for the road – clothes and other small items, the way a mother would for a son who is about to go into the army. I didn't check what she was putting into my small valise. I knew I could trust her. Yet I did notice that she was packing flannel underwear.

"Mama," I asked, "why are you packing such warm things? You know that I can't stand to wear heavy clothes."

"Take them along, my child," said my mother, "because it's very cold in Russia. Besides, you never know, the Russians might decide to send you to Siberia."

It's amazing what mothers can come up with sometimes!

"If only," she reflected, "if only you could end up proving that your silly mother was mistaken."

As she put my things together, among them a prayer book and *t'fillin*[14] (which I only discovered later, at the time of my arrest), my mother could hold back her tears no longer.

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14 *T'fillin:* Phylacteries, used in weekday morning prayers. These consist of two leather straps, each of which is attached to two small boxes containing different sections of the Torah. One strap is wound around the left arm and hand, the other around the forehead. The practice is a literal application of Deuteronomy 6:8, "And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thy hand, and they shall be for frontlets between thine eyes."

"I work my whole life. I bring up nine kids," she sobbed. "I take the food out of my mouth to feed my children. Nothing is too good for them. I do everything I can to bring them up as good Jews. Now, in my old age, when we should be getting some gratification from them, we end up alone."

The rest of her words were drowned by her tears. I caught only fragments – words like 'funeral', '*kaddish,*'[15] 'baby of the family'. Although I couldn't make out her exact words, there was no doubt about their meaning.

I was on the verge of breaking down, abandoning my plan, and letting whatever would happen befall me. Wearily, my father got up from his chair, and quietly paced back and forth. He plucked at his eyebrows and beard, a nervous habit he often repeated when he was upset. He did not take his eyes off me. His silence distressed me almost more than my mother's weeping.

My mother stuffed lemons, candies, crackers, an apple and other goodies into my pockets. I looked at her in amazement, as if to say, '*What are you doing that for? Do you think I'm going on a picnic or something?*'

Before I said goodbye to my parents, my father insisted that I say the Travelers' Prayer. I consented. My father also wanted to give me a coin for charity, for when I arrived safely at my destination. As our sages said, *The bearer of charity brings mitzvoth,*[16] *and no evil from without or loss of faith from within can befall him along the way.*

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15 *Kaddish*: Prayer for the dead.
16 *Mitzvoth* (pl.): Good deeds and the fulfillment of God's commandments. (Singular: *mitzvah)*

Suddenly my father changed his mind. "This kind of coin is forbidden over there," he said. "Taking such a treasured possession to Russia would be as meaningless as uttering a prayer in vain."

Holding back my tears, I said goodbye to my parents. I wished them a healthy old age, and much, gratification from their children and grandchildren. My last words to them were, "Don't worry about me. Everything will turn out fine, God willing. And don't worry if you don't get any letters in the next little while. You'd better take care of yourselves in such fateful times."

My parents accompanied me outside and watched me walk away. As I was about to turn onto a little side street, I took one last glance at my dear helpless parents. I will never forget that sight. It was the last time we ever saw each other!

My parents, Shapseh son of Pesach and Khaya daughter of David,[17] perished in Auschwitz on the 25th day of Iyar, 5704, together with many other pious souls from Sighet. May the Lord avenge their blood!

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17 Translator's note: The author's two children are named after his parents and his in-laws: his daughter's Hebrew name is Khaya Perl and his son's Hebrew name is Shapseh Haïm.

Chapter 7 - Adieu, Sighet

B, my intended, did not keep her word. She had promised that she would be at the train station by five o'clock. I couldn't figure out why she didn't show up. She had always been very punctual. As a matter of fact, punctuality was one of the qualities that had initially endeared her to me. And precisely now, when promptness was of the essence, she had let me down. A million thoughts raced through my head: Maybe she had changed her mind. Maybe something had happened to her sick mother. Maybe her parents had had second thoughts and decided that they didn't want to let their little girl leave home and venture out into a strange, unknown world. In a few minutes' time, the train would leave for Yasinya, a shtetl in the Carpathians, not far from the border, and from there, we were to smuggle ourselves across the Hungarian-Soviet border.

To illegally cross the Hungarian-Soviet border was easier said than done. The official border was a tunnel, but to cross it would require walking above the tunnel, over mountains and valleys, on winding roads and little footpaths over the Carpathian Mountains – a distance of over ten kilometres. And with each step, one ran the risk of being spotted by a Hungarian patrol guard. Those who were caught were shot on the spot, or at the very least, arrested.

I had bought two tickets to Yasinya, one for me, and one for *B*. The train was about to leave, and *B* hadn't arrived yet. My five companions, (who will be discussed in more depth later), were waiting impatiently for the train to move, and – adieu, Sighet!

Since *B* wasn't there, I figured that I might as well withdraw from the group, forget about the whole thing and go back. And what would be would be. I could only die once anyhow, so it might as well be here with my loved ones.

But at the last minute, just before the train departed, something happened to convince me once and for all that I had to leave without *B*.

Sighet had a large group of active Communists, who never intended to go to Russia themselves. Their plan was to stay and further the proletarian revolution from Hungary. This scheme did not stop them, however, from inciting non-Communists to cross the border to the Soviet Union. To this day, I have no idea why they did that. Was it their own idea, or a directive from the Communist party?

During that time, there were violent anti-Semitic outbreaks, and the government did not punish the perpetrators of those acts. On the contrary, they encouraged the Magyar hooligans to inflict all kinds of offences against Jewish citizens, so that a Jewish life was worth nothing. Under such circumstances, the Communists had no difficulty in finding people who wanted to escape – especially since they portrayed life in Soviet Russia as heaven on earth.

In the shtetl there were three brothers who were very popular. Former yeshiva students, they had suddenly abandoned their studies and, in the eyes of many, had sunk to moral turpitude – they had become active Communists. They had a police record. These three brothers were very successful in convincing people to run away to Russia. They even managed to persuade their own youngest brother, Zeinveleh, also a former yeshiva student, to try to smuggle himself into Soviet paradise.

Zeinveleh, a sensitive and gentle eighteen-year old, found out that I was planning to escape. He did not rest until he found me. He then begged and pleaded that I take him along to Russia. I tried to talk him out of it, but he persisted. I assured him that if I were to cross the border, I would ask the members of my group for their permission to have him join us. I didn't forget about Zeinveleh, and did indeed approach my partners, but they were categorically against it. First of all, our group was full. Furthermore, unlike his brothers, Zeinveleh was physically weak, and would have been unable to withstand such an arduous journey.

All of a sudden, whom did I see among the crowd at the railroad station? None other than Zeinveleh himself! He was all excited, sweat was pouring down his face, and he could hardly breathe as he looked for me. I could see that he wanted to tell me something. He looked as if he was about to explode. He began to vent his frustrations and rail against me. *Why hadn't I let him know? Why had I deceived him?*

I tried to say a few words in my own defence, but my efforts were in vain. Zeinveleh was very aggressive. He went on and on with his reproaches.

The weather was very muggy. The smoke from the locomotive, combined with the dampness of the air, made Zeinveleh cough. I started to talk, but he refused to listen. I waited impatiently for him to catch his breath.

"I've been looking for you everywhere," Zeinveleh gasped, calming down a bit. "I've just come from your house, because I thought I'd meet you there. When I opened the door, your parents looked as if they had just come back from a funeral. They were so distraught that they didn't even look at me. I didn't even have to ask them where you

were. I knew that the train would be leaving soon for Yasinya, so I was sure I'd find you here."

Zeinveleh's news about my parents distressed me so much that I didn't know if I was coming or going. There were but a few seconds left before the train would leave, and I'd already given up hope about *B*. If she hadn't come by now, she would probably stay home!

The train gave a loud whistle, and the conductor shouted, "*Beszalni! Beszalni!* All aboard! All aboard!"

I took one last glance at the crowd to be absolutely sure that *B* hadn't turned up at the last minute. I barely had time to hand over *B*'s ticket to Zeinveleh, and to ask him to give my regards to her and to my parents, then – Goodbye, Sighet, goodbye!

Chapter 8 - Boldly Marching Forward

It took us about three hours to reach Yasinya. It was already quite dark and cloudy, and an autumn dampness was in the air. I felt a gnawing void in my heart. The foggy darkness appeared mysterious and unclear, somewhat like our future... Waiting for us at the station was a *makher*, or people-smuggler, in whose hands our fate was entrusted. The *makher* handed us over to a Carpathian Ukrainian, who knew the hidden roads that led to the Soviet border. This Ukrainian would be our guide.[18] Our souls depended on him.

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Let me introduce you now to the other members of my group:

Itzik Baer Junger had participated with me in many illegal acts of self-defence. We were the same age, a little over twenty, and were both in the same predicament. Itzik Baer was an intellectual. Self-taught, he had gained a lot of knowledge of modern Hebrew literature and monotheistic philosophy. He had studied the teachings of Maimonides, the Ethics of Spinoza, and also *Moreh Nevukhe Ha'zeman* by Nakhman

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18 The original Yiddish text contains the Hebrew expression, *Moreh derekh*: literally teacher or guide of the way, or the route. A *moreh derekh* was a spiritual guide to the path leading to a proper and devout life. This expression is used throughout the chapter, not without irony. (In modern Hebrew, a *moreh derekh* is translated as 'tour guide.')

Krokhmal,[19] among others. On the whole, he was a nice young man, and it was a pleasure to be in his company, even when we were in trouble.

Lajos Jaeger was also my age. He explained the reason for his escape. "With the Hungarians in power, I won't be able to continue my university studies." Jaeger had spun the illusion that his educational opportunities would be limitless under the Soviets. "At the very least," he asserted, "the Russians won't discriminate against me because I am a Jew."

Junger and Jaeger were not active Communists.

Feivel Y was a simple boy, tall and skinny, with blond hair and ruddy cheeks. He was a fervent Communist. Two months earlier, he had been one of the first 'pioneers' to make it to the Promised Land. He had seized the opportunity to escape to Russia after the Romanians had withdrawn from Northern Transylvania, and before the Hungarians had begun patrolling the border. So we asked ourselves, *If Feivel crossed over to the Soviet Union last September, what's he doing here with us now?*

Feivel recounted his story: Once on the Soviet side, he and his group had been stopped by a Jewish officer who was fluent in Yiddish. This officer spoke to Feivel man-to-man, as to a friend, and suggested that he, together with the twenty-odd people with him, go back before the Hungarians took over the border. That way, he affirmed, they would not get into trouble. At the beginning, the officer spoke politely, yet firmly. Once

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19 Nakhman Krokhmal was a scholar, philosopher and leader of the Haskala or Jewish enlightenment; his major, seminal work, *Moreh Nevukhe Ha'zeman* (1851, "Guide for the Perplexed of Our Time"), made pioneering contributions in the areas of Jewish religion, literature, and especially history. Krokhmal's aim was to reconcile the traditions of Judaism with modern secular knowledge.

he realized that he was getting nowhere, he started to threaten them. Feivel's group did not want to listen to any mention of returning home. Some threw themselves to the ground, crying, *You want to send us back to the Fascist Magyars?* They screamed and protested *Deliver us, save us* – to no avail. Feivel and his whole crew were forced to turn back.

Feivel couldn't understand why this Jewish villain didn't want him and his group to go to Soviet heaven. He felt like Adam and Eve, as they were expelled from the Garden of Eden.

The truth is, that during that short period of time, thousands had crossed the border and were not heard of afterwards, and nobody else was sent back. So Feivel's case was truly an exception – indeed, a mystery. Yet he never gave up. He wanted to try his luck again. Maybe he would succeed this time.

Moshe V (or Moshe the Red) was, like Feivel Y, a plain-looking young man with no special knowledge. But, unlike Feivel, who was modest and unassuming, Moshe was full of himself. He had a tendency to parrot dogmatic Marxist phrases. He would have us believe that he was learned, and that he could practically recite the whole Torah in the blink of an eye. Moshe was also an active Communist, and couldn't resist the temptation to go to the land where the revolution was already a *fait accompli*. Moshe the Red, as his name implied, was red in appearance as well as ideology. He had a big red face, a thick neck and large nasty-looking eyes. From behind his thick lips you could see a number of long false teeth.

Rachel L, the only female in our group, was a poor, sick girl who suffered from tuberculosis. She needed special, expensive medical attention, and was seeking one last chance to get better. Maybe she would find health and prosperity in the Soviet Union?

Rudolph Weiss, had been placed with us by the *makher,* and was the only stranger to us. A short, skinny man with thin whiskers, aged about forty, he was the oldest person in our group. He spoke a broken German-Yiddish dialect. Rudolph came from Preşov, Slovakia. Slovakia, like all of Sudetenland, had been under German control, and Rudolph had lived for the past several years in the Carpathian territory. When the Hungarians seized the Carpathians from Czechoslovakia at the end of 1938, Rudolph Weiss became a resident of Hungary. He had been mobilized into the Hungarian Jewish work battalion over a year before, and had suffered at the hands of the Magyars as a Jew. He had no idea when he would be freed from that cursed rule. Rudolph was so fed up with the Hungarians and their regime that he decided that the best thing for him to do was to run like hell as far away as possible from the damned Magyars.

Rudolph was a big talker. He tried to tell us all sorts of wild stories. We believed his reasons for running away, although we soon recognized what kind of a person this Rudolph Weiss was. He claimed to be a chemical engineer, and boasted that he was a long-time Communist, well versed in Marxist Leninism. At the first opportunity, we called his bluff. It turned out that he didn't know the most rudimentary facts about chemistry, and he was no more a Marxist than he was a chemical engineer.

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Our Ukrainian guide led us through meadows, steppes and forests, on various pathways and trails. With each step, we imagined that we saw a sentry post up ahead. It wasn't just our imagination; there were indeed many patrol stations. Much as we tried to avoid these sentry posts, we almost bumped into one or two of them. We were also terrified that, at any minute, a Hungarian soldier, rifle in hand, would leap from the overhanging branches and shout, "Stop or I'll shoot!" *Brrr...* Such thoughts were enough to make us quake in our boots.

To make matters worse, it had begun to rain heavily, soaking us down to our very bones. At one point, we had to wade in icy water up to our knees. But we didn't care, even though a cold north wind was blowing. We sought to remove all negative thoughts from our minds and keep up our morale, as we imagined ourselves boldly marching forward like brave soldiers to the front.

It was a very dark night. We couldn't see the moon or the stars. The sky and the area around us were black. It was as if God had painted the whole world with a heavy dark brush.

At such a time, it was difficult to believe that our experience was only transitory, and that there could be light somewhere in the world.

In the darkness we moved, several shadowy human creatures. We, these spectres, had left behind, unclaimed, our miseries, our meagre worldly possessions, our homes and our loved ones. We sought salvation in a better and brighter world, a place where we believed we would find truth, integrity and honesty.

Soon the downpour let up, but a light drizzle continued to fall. The rain mingled with our sweat, and we were drenched through and through.

Under these conditions, Rachel L suffered the most. She was very tired and could barely catch her breath. We helped her out every chance we could. Each of us, in turn, took her by the arm and supported her as she walked. We comforted her and reassured her that the worst was almost over.

We carried on like that with no let-up until about one in the morning. Some of us had brought along heavy backpacks full of clothes. The border was still far, and we were so drenched you could practically wring us out. We were exhausted. We felt that we had to take a break, if only for a short while. We noticed a couple of tree stumps and decided to rest for a bit, to give us the strength to continue our march. As I was about to sit down on one of the wet stumps, I inadvertently touched my pocket and found a lemon that my mother had given me for my journey. I took it out and cut a slice for everyone. As soon as we sank our teeth into the tart yet delicious lemon, we all began to feel stronger and healthier. The entire group wondered how I could have had the foresight to bring along something so refreshing and beneficial as that lemon.

=♦=

The Ukrainian led us to a spot in the woods. He stopped there, and announced, "This is it!" Until here, we were his responsibility. From now on, he was leaving us on our own. He wouldn't come any farther with us. Before he said goodbye, he asked us to kindly clean out our pockets.

"Before I let you in on the secret of where the border is exactly, I ask that you give me all your money, down to the last penny, since you won't need this currency on the other side anyway."

We asked him to at least come a little further with us, as close to the border as possible, to which he answered sweetly, "*Prashim pana.* I would willingly go with you a little more, but I can't, because we're near the border now. You don't have to be afraid of anything, because in half an hour you'll be free Soviet citizens."

It made no difference whether we took his words as hypocrisy or intimidation. We knew that we had nothing to lose if we were to give him all our cash. We didn't have a lot with us anyhow. And, in truth, what use could we make of Hungarian money on the other side of the border? It would probably be a good idea to let the Russians see that we were coming to them naked and barefoot, without a penny to our name. Naïve as we were, we intuitively knew that we wouldn't be able to exchange Hungarian coins for Soviet rubles in a Russian bank. So we gave the Ukrainian all the money we had. He might as well have it, and use it in good health!

"Now listen to me," the Ukrainian whispered furtively, insinuating that if he were to speak any louder, then – God forbid – the Hungarian patrol guard would hear what he was saying. "Listen to what I tell you. Pay attention to each word – it's very important for you to know this. Not far from here, you'll see three rows of barbed wire. That's the border. If you succeed in passing through the first row of barbed wire, that means that you're on the other side of the Hungarian border. Between the first and the third row, you're in no-man's land. After the third row, you'll be on Soviet territory."

"Farewell," proclaimed our former guide. Then he blessed us as if he were a priest: "Be well, and may you have good health in your new home. May God bless you and be kind to you. May the Almighty help you and see that you have a better future in your new homeland. *Auf wiederzein. Do svidanie*!"

Chapter 9 - Sheep Without a Shepherd

Once on our own, we felt like sheep without a shepherd. We didn't know where to go or what to do. We were worried that, in the darkness, we would get lost in the woods, and instead of heading towards the Russian border, we would end up going in the opposite direction.

It was so quiet, we couldn't even hear the leaves rustling. From time to time, we felt the soft caress of a light breeze. Once in a while, the stillness was interrupted by the distant whistle of a locomotive, the howling of a dog or the hooting of an owl. The owl's hoarse, piercing cry sounded as if it were pleading for help.

We wandered quite a distance, several kilometres at least. According to our guide's instructions, we should have reached our destination ages ago. No wonder the Ukrainian hadn't wanted to accompany us; now we were entering the most difficult part of our journey. The narrow paths were littered with piles of big branches, most likely planted there as anti-tank barricades, and we kept tripping over them like drunkards. Above all, we were having problems with Rachel. She was having so much trouble keeping up, we had to push her or carry her most of the way.

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It was very difficult for those with heavy backpacks and suitcases. Some complained that they might as well discard their luggage, because it was getting harder and harder for them. They felt that they would not be able to continue if they had to carry such heavy loads.

At one point, Feivel Y took off his backpack and threw it to the ground. I offered to help him with his bag, but he wouldn't listen.

"Don't do it," I begged him. "It could cause suspicion. If the Hungarian border guards notice any luggage around here, this place will be watched more carefully, and then – God forbid – innocent victims will be caught."

Everybody agreed with me. "Yes, he's right," they said.

=♦=

We looked around to check if everyone was there and no one had fallen behind. It was then that we noticed that Rudolph Weiss wasn't with us any longer. We waited several minutes. He didn't show up. Where had he disappeared to all of a sudden? We didn't dare shout. We didn't know what to do. Maybe something had happened to him. He was our comrade – a friend in need. We couldn't go one step farther until we found him.

No matter what, we had to locate him. We retraced our steps quite a way, and there he was – lying on the ground. He had succumbed to exhaustion, got sick, and fainted. A new misfortune!

"Leaf' me here," he told us in his broken German-Yiddish accent. "Leaf' me alone, and go on wit'out me. I can't continue no more."

We asked him what he meant. He told us he wanted to go back. We didn't know whether he meant that he was sorry that he had come in the first place and really wanted to go back to the Magyars, or whether he just couldn't go any farther. Regardless, we had to try to talk him into staying with us.

At that point, I remembered my lemons. I fished in my pocket, pulled out a second lemon and gave it to Rudolph so he could take strength from it. The lemon had the desired effect, and shortly afterwards, Rudolph began to plod along with us. We never left him alone after that. We always kept an eye on him. We divided ourselves up – two to help Rachel and two to help Rudolph.

=♦=

Sooner or later all things must come to an end. So it was with our adventure. We finally reached the first barbed wire fence. Climbing over it was no mean feat. Our coats and pants kept getting caught on the barbed wire, and we couldn't go forward or back. Those who finally made it over tried to help the others, only to get tangled up once again. We felt at this moment that our lives were hanging in the balance. None of us moved until the last person had made it over the fence.

We breathed a sigh of relief, but still did not dare to stop and rest. We seemed to be infused with energy and courage, and even Rudolph and Rachel were like different people.

After what seemed like an eternity, we managed to climb over the third barbed wire fence. Now we were out of danger for sure. We gathered some branches and placed

them on the damp earth. Then we lay down and rested our weary bones as if we didn't have a care in the world.

We were exhausted and sweaty from our exertions, so at the beginning, we didn't notice the cool mountain air. But after a short nap, we woke up feeling weak and chilled to the bone.

We had not thought to bring anything substantial to eat. We were sure that once we were to arrive in Russia, there would be plenty of food for us. We started checking our pockets. Everyone found something to snack on. I pulled out a third lemon. We all feasted on the lemon, and were very grateful to have it. I couldn't hold back any longer, and told my friends, "Well, if you're thankful to have this delicacy, it's my mother who deserves all the credit." They couldn't get over what a clever mother I had.

We all had something in our pockets. Some of us found an apple; others a piece of bread and a clove of garlic that our mothers had given us for good luck. We shared our treasures with the group, and ate our few goodies with gusto.

While we were resting, it got very cold. We thought it would be a good idea to start a fire. It wouldn't hurt to warm our bones, and dry out our wet clothes while we were at it. Rachel L was our biggest worry. She became feverish, and started shivering as if she had contracted malaria. We covered her and nursed her as we would a small child. Moshe the Red tried to calm her, "Have a little more courage, and gather your strength. You'll see. Pretty soon you'll be warm and cozy in a top-notch sanatorium in a Soviet spa."

We lit a fire with some brushwood, and little by little we got warm. Rachel L started to feel a bit better. We were all in good spirits. We talked a lot and spun fantasies about our future.

Chapter 10 - The Worst is Over

We sat around a fire in a field in the Soviet territory, just next to the border, and dried out our shoes, our socks, our clothes and all our other belongings. We began to speak excitedly.

Moshe the Red talked more than anyone else. That designation was only a nickname, but everybody in Sighet had always called him Moshe the Red (which incidentally was a very suitable moniker), so I will continue to refer to him as such.

Moshe was in a very optimistic mood. He felt right at home. His thick lips didn't stop blabbering for a second. He chattered on as if we had just happened to come to this spot for a picnic.

"The worst is over," expounded Moshe, as if he were giving us a lecture. Itzik Baer Junger interrupted, "And if there is any way in this world to cheat death, hopefully we have done so by smuggling ourselves across the Hungarian-Soviet border."

Moshe was annoyed at having been interrupted in the middle of his speech, yet he approved of Itzik's remark. Nodding his head, he continued, "Now we begin a new life under a new regime." He got more and more enchanted with his own words, and spoke in a bombastic tone that was totally unsuited to the occasion. "We are now in the USSR,

where all men live in brotherhood and fight shoulder to shoulder with them for a better world, where each person works and earns his living, where there is no class struggle, and especially no anti-Semitism, where nobody exploits his neighbour, where all people share their loaf of bread equally, and where you will never find one person full while another goes hungry. We are indeed in a new world."

Moshe couldn't have spoken better if he had been hired by the Soviet government itself. In truth, we were all very optimistic – not because we imagined that we would amass huge fortunes under the Soviet regime. On the contrary, we knew that we would have to work hard for our sustenance. But our aspirations were so minimal that it was beyond our imagination to envision not being able to attain a simple meagre existence through hard work in this great socialist land that looked after the needs of the downtrodden.

The fire was slowly dwindling. For a while we rested quietly. We were all thinking about our fate, spinning all kinds of whimsical fantasies and illusions. At this moment the past had ceased to exist for us. We wanted to erase it from our memories.

However, from time to time, I could not help but think about my parents and my beloved *B*. I would sigh with the painful memory, but then I would try to push it out of my mind and concentrate on the present.

I felt really sorry for Rachel. I noticed that she couldn't stop shivering under the blanket that she had borrowed from one of us. The fire was breathing its last, and we thought that maybe we should revive it again. We then noticed that the dawn was just breaking.

In the early morning light, we could see that it would turn out to be a dark, overcast day. The dawn's ash-grey light was foggy and dull, as if someone had switched off the sunshine. The mysterious dim rays on the horizon were more frightening and dreadful than the darkness had been. We all felt it; yet we didn't want to believe it.

"Is it possible that our first day in Soviet Russia should be such an angry, gloomy day?" some of us muttered to ourselves.

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We had no idea how long we should stay in that spot. We didn't want to continue any farther, because we were afraid that we might get lost if we walked in another direction. It made no sense to just sit in one place. We looked at each other and asked, "So, what do we do now?"

Itzik Baer Junger had an idea.

"Comrades," he said. "I have a plan. Let's make a big fire now, so the Soviet border guards will see it before the sun comes up. Why should we wander around in circles to find them? Let them find us instead!"

(We later found out that other *perebezchiks* had also stopped at this very spot in the woods and had likewise had the great honour of being arrested by Soviet border guards.)

We unanimously endorsed Itzik Baer's plan. We gathered pine and oak branches. The fire grew bigger and began to blaze brightly. Thick smoke rose up to the sky.

Suddenly we heard a loud, shrill voice from an unknown direction – as if it came from heaven. We didn't see the creator of the voice, nor did we understand the words addressed to us.

"Ruki vverkh! Strelyt budu![20]

Now that we looked more closely on both sides, we noticed that not far from us among the branches, there was a *pagranitchnik*, a Russian soldier, with a *shlem*, a distinct Russian hat on his head. The Soviet emblem, the hammer and sickle inside a red star, was on the *shlem*. The soldier was dressed in a long fur coat, and held a rifle pointed in our direction.

We wanted to rush up, throw our arms around the soldier and kiss him on both cheeks. But since we didn't understand the meaning of his words, we slowly picked up our few belongings, and approached him as if he were a good friend. Yet we were bewildered. We couldn't figure out why in the world this soldier would be holding a loaded rifle aimed at us. We thought about it for a while and finally came to the conclusion that it was probably just a formality –a military symbol. That must be it!

The soldier was a tall, strapping Russian with a ruddy complexion. *"Oruzhie est?"*[21] he asked sternly.

We ignored him again, since we didn't understand what he was saying anyway. He pointed to where he wanted us go, and ordered, *"Shagom marsh, poshli, davai!"*[22]

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20 "Hands up, or I'll shoot!"
21 "Do you have any weapons?"
22 "Start marching. Let's go!"

What we did understand was that we had to go where he indicated, and that we were now under Soviet authority. All of a sudden, the border guard fired a bullet into the air. We were walking ahead of him, so we were startled by the sudden shot. We couldn't figure out why he had done it. Within a few minutes, two younger border guards appeared, probably adjutants of the first one. We wondered why a healthy armed soldier needed two helpers just for us.

We trudged through the mud for about a kilometre, until the *glavnaya pogranichnaya okhrana*, the main border post. We certainly weren't given the red carpet treatment once we got there. They just put us into another room and told us to wait. The date was November 7, 1940. The room was decorated with many posters and pictures of dead and living Communist leaders. I can remember some: Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Kalinin, to name a few. Between the posters and the Russian writing, we gathered that it probably read as follows: 'In honour of the 23rd anniversary of the great October Revolution.'

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We got tired of waiting, so we took a nap. We woke up at around lunchtime, and realized how achy and fatigued we were from our difficult journey. Every bone in our body was sore. In the little room there was a bench for only two, at most three people. Some of us sat on our suitcases, some sat on the bench, holding on to each other, and some just plunked themselves down on the floor.

Despite our exhaustion, we were ravenous. What a pleasure it would be to fill our bellies with something tasty. Our Russian comrades would certainly earn themselves a place in heaven if they would just honour us with anything, especially something warm.

We were beginning to get quite nervous because our 'comrades' ignored us. At about two o'clock, Itzik Baer Junger turned to me and said, "Isn't it about time they gave us something to eat? Those watchmen aren't even thinking about us. They don't even notice that we're starving."

We were running out of patience, with all that waiting. At about three o'clock a soldier finally showed up at the door and threw us a glance. He didn't say anything, so we approached him, and made gestures with our hands pointing to our mouths.

Rudolph spoke to him in Czech, but the soldier didn't understand a word. Finally Rudolph screamed, *"Isti! Isti!* Food! Food!"

At last, we saw the soldier coming towards us with a steaming kettle, and we were convinced that he had finally understood what we wanted. We assumed that there must be some tea in the kettle. A little hot, sweet tea would certainly be delightful.

To our great disappointment, this kettle only contained *kipyatok*, hot water. Although we were feeling miserable, and we would have loved something warm, we couldn't stomach the idea of swallowing this drink.

At that moment, we could never have imagined that there would come a time when we would fight over a bit of warm water, and that we would be very happy to be able to partake of treat such as this.

For some of us, though, this whole situation was puzzling. Especially Itzik Baer. He was the intellectual of the group, yet he couldn't figure it out. He was really upset. "What's the matter with them?" he contended. "If they don't want to give us food, so be it, but why do they have to make fun of poor people?"

We noticed that Feivel Y and Moshe the Red, former active comrades, were whispering and smiling under their moustaches. Moshe came up to us, and with his usual know-it-all manner, proceeded to lecture us about our situation.

"Do you have any idea of what day it is today in the Soviet Union, and for all the devoted followers of the Communist regime?" Although his voice was a little weaker, he still tried to maintain his pompous enthusiasm. "Today is the seventh of November. In the Soviet Union, today is the biggest holiday of them all. This is the commemoration of the big October Revolution of 1917! The seventh of November is an even bigger holiday than the first of May. And on such a momentous occasion, it would never enter anybody's mind to worry about insignificant creatures such as us. They have much more important things to think about. Besides, what's the big deal with the boiled water? Why are you so surprised? The soldier probably didn't understand what we wanted. He must have thought that we were asking for water, so he brought us water. Come to think of it, he was doing us a favour. It's a good thing he boiled the water first, since that kills all the bacteria."

(I wondered then, and I still wonder to this day how there can be so many wise and learned apologists[23] ready to defend Communism, and make excuses for all of its failings.)

Even if Moshe the Red was misguided, and his words only phrases to defend his 'comrades,' we were happy to hear his explanation. After such a difficult journey, and after so much waiting, we needed something reassuring to hold on to.

Instead of being fed, we were interrogated. An officer spoke while a soldier took down everything we said. First they ordered us to empty all our pockets. They were particularly interested in our jewelry, wristwatches, fountain pens and wallets.

They checked the contents of our pockets, and then searched us from head to toe. During the interrogation, we had to tell them our first and last names as well as our fathers' given names, or patronymic. We were also asked if we belonged to the Communist Party, and if we had relatives in Russia.

These formalities were brief and intense. They then put us into an armoured vehicle, and an officer and two soldiers took us from Yavlanitza to Varokhta, a Galician village next to the border, not far from Nadvornaya. We spent the night isolated in a cell without a bite to eat.

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We went to sleep hungry, but the bedbugs feasted that night. Those little red creatures sucked our blood and had a real holiday at our expense.

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23 Translator's note: The author calls these apologists *Levi Yitzhak Berditchevers*. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev was particularly famous for defending the Jewish people before God and always interpreting their actions in the best possible light.

At the beginning we hadn't felt the little red pests because we had slept soundly, even though we had had nothing to eat. When we woke up in the morning, we noticed that our bodies were covered with blisters and scabs that made us look like lepers.

We looked at each other with pity. We consoled ourselves that this was only temporary. "This won't last long; it's like a bad dream; the Soviets have only been here for a short while; they haven't had a chance to get themselves organized yet. They don't know what to do with us, so for the time being they've taken us into custody."

Moshe the Red remained steadfast in his beliefs. He dismissed every indication that we were under arrest.

It was after noon and we still hadn't been given anything to eat. But they did feed us with another interrogation. This time they called us in individually. An officer, through an interpreter, asked us many questions: our exact birth dates; our livelihood at home; our reasons for running away from Hungary; our motives for coming to the Soviet Union, and so on.

Finally, they gave us food. After the interrogation, we had our first Soviet meal: cold greasy gruel.

It wasn't long before our meal began to take its toll. The soup, consisting mainly of cold water and lard, gave us all stomach cramps. We had been so hungry that we had gobbled it down as if it were a wonderful, nutritious meal, but this supposedly 'hearty' soup turned out to do us more harm than good.

Rachel had been separated from us. I caught a glimpse of her in the office when we were both being interrogated. She was getting the same treatment we all were. Rachel was very far indeed from a cure in a top-notch Soviet sanatorium.

On that day, they brought us together with other *perebezchiks*, escapees, like ourselves, as well as with some people who had been caught trying to leave Russia for Hungary. The Soviets would never refer to us as 'refugees.' We were under suspicion of espionage. So in their minds, we were *perebezchiks* – people who ran – a term deserving of contempt rather than pity.

We were becoming more and more surprised. "What possible connection could we have with true criminals who wanted to run away from Russia to Hungary?"

"*Matzei min et mino*[24]. The Russians must believe that we are all of the same species," Itzik Baer Junger whispered into my ear.

There were seventy of us who had been arrested, including four women. An armed soldier ordered us to line up *po dva,* in double file. We were then placed in a boxcar reserved for prisoners, and transported to Nadvornaya.

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No sooner had we detrained at the Nadvornaya station, than we heard a soldier command us to line up two abreast. We were then in for a new surprise. Not only were we surrounded by armed soldiers, but there were four ferocious wolf-like hounds

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24 *Matzei min et mino:* Literally, 'a species will find its own species.' This expression is used on several occasions in the Talmud. Likely, Itzik Baer, the intellectual, is hinting that, the authorities have projected the 'criminality' of the other 'species' of lawbreakers onto the innocent group of *perebezchiks*.

guarding us as well. The soldier warned us that if we tried to run away, or even if we just straggled off the road, he had the perfect right to shoot us without any further warning.

"Understand?" the soldier asked.

"Yes." we all replied sombrely.

But that was not all. Next the soldier gave us a lesson in criminal discipline. *"Ruki nazad davai!* " he barked.

We didn't all understand what *ruki nazad* meant; indeed we understood very little of what the soldier was saying. There was a group of Ukrainians and Poles among us, who immediately followed the soldiers' orders, so we were soon able to figure out what to do. As it turned out, we were beginning to comprehend not only the literal meaning of the words *ruki nazad* – hands behind you – but we were also becoming profoundly aware of its true significance.

Some of us did not obey the command quickly enough. I must confess that I was in no great hurry to put my hands behind my back. I noticed that Moshe the Red likewise was not complying with the order. Even Moshe was beginning to revolt against his fellow party members' discipline. It must have been a very bitter pill for him to swallow.

The soldier was beside himself with anger. His booming voice thundered and trembled with burning wrath and fury.

"A vy ne slyshali? Ruki nazad vam govoryat! Didn't you hear me? I said, Hands behind your backs!"

The soldier didn't content himself with only shouting. He went over to Moshe, grabbed his two arms and roughly shoved them behind his back. It's hard to say why that soldier was so compassionate to Moshe, of all people.

After this unpleasant incident, which was only the beginning of many hardships and disappointments, we all realized that we couldn't be smart alecks. Discipline is discipline! We would have to obey all commands immediately, and not wait for the soldier to bestow an honour on us, like the one that had just been conferred upon Moshe the Red.

We marched like that, with our hands behind our backs, along the streets of Nadvornaya. As we trudged along, we searched for a Jewish face, to no avail.

As a matter of fact, it so happens that the name Nadvornaya was not unfamiliar to us. Rabbi Mordekhai Leifer *Nadvorner* was well renowned in Sighet for his wonders and miracles.[25] Besides, two of his grandchildren, the Kretshiniver Rabbi and the Slatviner Rabbi, had lived in Sighet. (Moreover, Rabbi Mordekhai was Rabbi Meir of Przemyshlany's grandson.)

We marched for a long time along the streets of Nadvornaya, until we came to a fortification. We realized that this was a jail where we were to be imprisoned.

We almost didn't care anymore. We were so tired of walking that we were ready to stop anywhere, even in a prison. The soldier in charge of us handed us over to the

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25 *Nadvorner:* from Nadvornaya. Known for his extreme piety, for his humility, for his insight into human nature, and as a miracle worker, Rabbi Mordekhai's presence in Nadvornaya attracted thousands of Jews wishing to receive his advice and his blessing. He also traveled through the Hassidic shtetls of Transcarpathia, including Sighet.

main *nachalnik,* warden of the jail who was to take command of us from then on. While they were taking care of all the formalities, we were told, "Hands behind you! Turn to the wall!"

Oh, yes! To all of us, even to Moshe the Red, there was no longer any doubt that we had crawled into a new pit of hardship and misfortune.

Chapter 11 - They Trod on my Name

We stood, our hands behind us, facing the wall for over two hours. In the afternoon, an officer came and ordered us to turn around. He then called our names, whereupon we were expected to respond and add our patronymic. For example, Moshe the Red would have to reply 'Maisei Michaelovitch', plus, of course, his family name.

The officer, a swarthy fellow with a big fat mug, didn't blink an eye. He approached us without even looking at us. Our faces interested him not in the least. As far as he was concerned, we could just as well be inanimate objects or live animals under his command. So he counted, *Raz, dva, tri, chetyre*, and so on.

Our names sounded unusual coming out of the officer's mouth. Spoken in a Russian accent, they seemed to take on a life of their own, apart from us. We felt, that like our names, we, too, were becoming disconnected from our former selves.

Despite his heavy accent, we were able to distinguish our Jewish names when the officer called them out. But for some reason, he stumbled when he got to the name Jaeger. It was impossible for us to figure out to whom he was referring. *Jaeger* may sound like such a simple name, yet the officer stammered "*Ilger, Yelger, Elger*." At first we thought that perhaps he had trouble reading. But it turned out that other Russians also had difficulty with that name.

Russians pronounce the soft consonant *y* as an *l*. So, in their language, that name would have sounded like *Yelger*. I discovered this fact later on, when I was trying to learn Russian myself, and had difficulty with the soft consonant.

After he finished his roll call, the officer put the papers under his arm, took us into a small, long corridor, and counted us again.

On both sides of the corridor, there were rows of narrow iron doors. The doors were bolted and secured with big locks. Above each door was little peephole through which a watchman could look in and see what was going on inside. The peephole was designed so that nobody from the inside could see what was going on in the hall. From behind the doors, we could hear soft whispers in a language that sounded foreign to us, but which made us shudder, nonetheless.

In this corridor, a new procedure started: We were searched again from head to toe. They took everything away, even our shoelaces and every scrap of paper that we had on us. The most terrible thing was when the NKVD[26] opened our suitcases. They threw all our belongings onto the floor as if they were nothing but trash. They looked into my suitcase, and discovered my *t'fillin* pouch, on which my name had been embroidered in gold letters inside a gold Star of David.

The embroidery on my *t'fillin* pouch was no ordinary needlework. Quite the opposite. My mother had begun this labour of love a full two years before my Bar Mitzvah. She had set out to stitch a beautiful *t'fillin* cover for her youngest child, and it

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[26] NKVD: Soviet Secret Police. Acronym for 'People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs', which was also responsible for all places of detention (e.g., forced labour camps) and for the regular police.

had turned out to be a true masterpiece.

When the soldiers took my *t'fillin* from their pouch, they looked at me with disdain, as if to ask, "What kind of weird specimen are you?" Then the officer just threw my *t'fillin* to the floor, as if they were mere trinkets. Instinctively, I leaned over to pick them up, but a soldier held me back.

As far as the NKVD was concerned, our personal possessions were of no value. I saw how they trod on them. They trod on my *t'fillin.* They trod on my name. They trod on everything that was holy and dear to us.

In truth, I was surprised myself when I saw the soldier take the *t'fillin* out of my valise. When I had made the decision to go to Russia, I was aware that I wouldn't be doing much praying there. I hadn't even thought to take articles of worship with me. My mother's priorities, however, lay elsewhere. She was determined to ensure that my spiritual necessities would be packed along with my material belongings. My mother had scrimped and saved, a penny at a time, to put together enough money to buy new *t'fillin* from Mr. Monish the bookseller, whose *t'fillin* were the most expensive and valued in all of Sighet. Shortly before my Bar Mitzvah, she surprised me, and announced, "I have a gift for you, my son – new *t'fillin*!"

I didn't know that my *t'fillin* were packed with my other belongings; but once I saw them they became very dear to me. As a matter of fact, I had never realized how precious they were until that very moment. Of course, I never saw the *t'fillin* or its embroidered pouch again.

That was the last time in my life that I had the honour of seeing my name in gold letters...

They also took away the wristwatch that I had received as a gift from my beloved, as well as my fountain pen, my wallet, my pocket comb, my toothbrush, and over one hundred photographs of my dear ones. All these precious things I never saw again.

We were ordered to undress – as naked as Adam. Instead of the good angels I used to invoke when I said the daily *Krishma*[27] prayer: *On my right side, Michael; on my left side, Gabriel; in front of me, Uriel; behind me, Raphael*; now, on the contrary, there were four watchmen – four angels of destruction surrounding us. These devils in human form ordered us, "Sit! Stand! Sit! Stand!"

They cut our hair with a dull knife. We looked at each other with pity. Jagged tufts of hair protruded from our scalps. We felt sorry for each other, and by extension, for ourselves. When we beheld one another we could only imagine what we looked like; we didn't have a mirror to catch a glimpse of our own pitiful reflections.

It had only been a few days since we left home, yet already we looked so different, so awful: our heads shorn, our faces pale and dotted with stubble, our bodies neglected and filthy. What would come next?

We didn't receive any food on that day, but no matter. We had lost our appetite, not only to eat, but also to live.

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[27] *Krishma:* The S*h'ma* prayer, Judaism's declaration of faith, *Hear O Israel, The Lord our God, the Lord is One,* recited twice daily by Orthodox Jews and several times in every Jewish Sabbath and festival service. As a bedtime prayer, the *Sh'ma* is known as *Krishma.*

With the jangling of keys and the clang of a padlock, the mysterious door finally opened wide. We felt a hand push us into a confined little room that already contained about forty people. At first glance, we wondered how we could possibly squeeze into such a small space. It looked as if we wouldn't even have enough room to sit on the cement floor.

As soon as we stepped into the room, we were immediately seized by an overpowering odour. The stench in the cell suffocated us; we thought we would faint from the awful smell of it. The 'bathroom' was a *parasha*, a latrine bucket, in a corner of the same room. Lice were there aplenty, and at least as many miseries…

In the Nadvornaya jail cell, we got to know a new group of men, mostly Carpathian Jews and Ukrainians, and also Hungarians who had had the privilege of arriving here a few days earlier. Most were in the same category as us – runaways from the Magyar Fascists.

These 'veterans', who had been here for a few days already, tried to console us. They knew full well how we must be feeling, after having been given such an honourable welcome and treated as distinguished guests. They hastened to reassure us that this was only a temporary situation.

"Here, in the Nadvornaya jail," one of the veterans explained, "nobody stays for more than two weeks. They just have to do a background check on us, to make sure that we're not spies or undesirable elements. After this two-week honeymoon, we'll be transferred to Stanislav. There we'll only have to undergo a few formalities. And before you know it, they'll give us Russian papers, and we'll be free Soviet citizens."

Another inmate, who hailed from Khust, a Carpathian shtetl, was of the same opinion. This Khuster, named Herschel Pollack, was in an optimistic mood. Herschel Pollack had courted a young girl whose parents were religious and wealthy, and who were very opposed to this match. They were strict with their daughter, and forbade her to even speak to Herschel.

Herschel was madly in love with Leah'ke – that was her name – but he recognized that his situation was hopeless. He knew that he would lose his beloved unless he took drastic measures. So he had devised a plan to talk her into to running away with him to Russia. That way he would get Leah'ke out of the lap of the Fascist Magyars, and have her to himself in the process. It had not been easy for Herschel to execute his plan. Now he and Leah'ke were in a Russian prison. Notwithstanding the momentary realities, he was still very hopeful about their future.

Another prisoner from Grosswardein, by the name of Bernat Berkovics, was no less optimistic than Herschel. Berkovics had arrived together with his wife, Fanny and their only child, their darling three-year old son. Bernat explained, "It makes no sense for the Soviets to keep us in jail." He added confidently, "What are we, a bunch of spies or criminals, or something?"

Whether I agreed with the conclusions of Herschel Pollack and Bernat Berkovics or not, is of no consequence. As it was, I was so dazed that I wasn't sure where I was in this world. I felt like I was in a trance. From the first moment of our arrest, I was under the impression that we were lost souls, thrown into the depths of the netherworld in a land of desolation, from which there was no escape... I could not believe that we were truly

living this nightmare. I wasn't able to collect my thoughts and figure out what was actually happening.

I did come to one conclusion, however. My *B* deserved to have an ode composed to her cleverness. In fact, she was truly brilliant. Good for her that she had not let me lead her astray on this tortuous road, and that she had changed her mind about accompanying me. I consoled myself with the thought that I still had a little bit of good luck despite my misfortune. I was relieved that *B* hadn't come with me. For my own pain and hardship, I alone was responsible. I had made an error in judgment: I should have tried to run and hide away somewhere else in Hungary – and never have fled to Russia.

"*Nu*, what's done is done," I said to myself, as my thoughts spun again and again through my mind. "It's a done deed; it's too late for me to do anything about it. But if *B* had come with me, I'd have eaten myself up alive, because she would have had to suffer so much due to my stupidity. Being sorry wouldn't have been enough consolation. I can't even help myself; how could I have been able to help her?"

Spinning my thoughts, I sat on the cement floor. Under me was a pitiful little bundle of clothes that I had brought from home. My suitcase had been confiscated, along with most of my other possessions, when we were searched upon our arrival in Nadvornaya. I scratched myself all over – where I had been bitten, and even where I had not been bitten.

I thought again, Oy*! Since B has not come with me, will the flame of our love be extinguished? The drama that was performed between us will be imprinted in my heart*

for the rest of my life. What a tragedy it has turned into! May I only have the strength to survive the pain of never seeing her again.

Then I mused, "How can others like a Herschel Pollack or a Bernat Berkovics be so sure that they will be reunited with their chosen ones? Is Berkovics certain that he will ever see his beloved wife and his darling child again?"

Such and similar thoughts tortured me, consciously and unconsciously, during the first days of my arrest. I refrained from expressing my pessimistic views to anybody. I didn't want to inflict my bitter vision on the rest of the group. "If some people here are optimistic," I thought to myself, "let them fool themselves. Such self-deception just makes their pain easier to bear… Oh, God! Am I the only one who sees such a dismal future for us all?"

Moshe the Red was the first to succumb to the suffocating atmosphere of the jail cell, and he fainted. Rudolph Weiss, the 'chemical engineer' was the second one to collapse. We poured water on them and pinched their noses until we managed to revive them. The Ukrainians, who had attempted to flee from Russia to Hungary, just gazed from their corner, and smiled. "What nebbishes, what weaklings!" they probably thought.

We knocked at the door for quite a long time, until finally a soldier with a ruddy, overstuffed, ugly face, came to our cell. He glared at us. How dare we disturb his rest? We tried to tell him that we had two sick people in the cell and that they needed medical help. The soldier disappeared with an irate growl, and without a word, locked the door from the outside.

Both Moshe and Rudolph felt very bad. They moaned and groaned and couldn't eat or drink a thing.

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The cell doors had special features. Besides the little peephole through which the guards could monitor the movements of the prisoners, there was also a small hatch in the middle. If a watchman decided that something was important enough to merit his attention, he would open the little hatch from the outside. This little door was only big enough for a hand and a bowl to fit through. When we were given our daily rations, the guards would open only the little hatch, and pass us a bowl of food or some bread.

Two days after Moshe and Rudolph took ill, the little door opened. We heard someone cry out, *"Bolnye est?* Is anybody sick?" The dark, beardless, ugly face of a Russian paramedic peered through the hatch. When Moshe and Rudolph complained about their ills, the paramedic took their pulse through the little door. He then snarled *"Khorosho!* Good!" and thus ended his visit.

This is how we suffered in the Nadvornaya jail for several days, each day similar to the next. Every day, I was more and more relieved that *B* had stayed home. I imagined that if *B* had also been here, she would have been taken with Rachel L and put into a dirty, lice-infested cell together with Ukrainian and Polish women, among whom some were probably genuine criminals. She would certainly not have been spared, and she would surely have suffered the same fate as all of us.

Ah, how happy I was that at least *B* was free!

Chapter 12 - The Happiest Couple in The Whole World

My relief that *B* had stayed home was short-lived.

Some days after our arrest, we heard a noise out in the corridor. We put our ears to the door, and heard the voice of the same officer who had brought us to the Nadvornaya jail.

I had a feeling that I might hear some familiar names coming out of the officer's mouth, so I pressed my ear to the door and put all my strength into listening. Sure enough, I could indeed hear names that I recognized: Zeinvel Isaacovitch, Goldstein, David Jacobovitch, Naovitch, Nathan Michaelovitch, and others that I couldn't identify, because the officer mispronounced them with his Russian accent.

The names that I was able to make out were all familiar – from Sighet. These new arrivals must have found out that I had gone to save myself in the Soviet paradise, and must have wanted to do likewise. "It won't take long," I thought, "for them to realize that they are in hell instead."

A new succession of lost souls in the land of desolation!

Well, I thought bitterly, *at least now Zeinveleh won't have cause to be angry with me any more.*

In my heart, however, I felt sorry for him. He was such a kind, gentle soul. As a yeshiva student, he had always been sickly and under doctor's care, and now he would have to languish in jail under conditions that would surely cripple him for the rest of his life.

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Our cell was extremely cramped. There wasn't even enough room for us to lie down at night. And when we did try to sleep, we lay like herrings in a barrel. Despite our confined quarters, I couldn't wait for the door to open, so I could see my new guests from home.

It had been over a week since I had lost my home, and this would give me an opportunity to get the latest news from Sighet. I was anxious to find out what impression I had made in the shtetl by running away from home, and whether things were the same there as before.

When the door opened, I got a completely unexpected surprise. Whom did I see? None other than Oscar, my darling *B*'s little brother!

It struck me like a thunderclap in the middle of a clear day... Oscar was a sixteen-year old youth, sweet and naïve, with shining and clever eyes like his sister.

He was delighted to see me. What a coincidence that we had ended up together. In the Nadvornaya jail, there were several cells, and he could very well have been placed in another part of the prison. Oscar embraced me and kissed me as if I were his beloved long-lost brother. My first question was, "Where is *B?*"

"Where is she? What do you mean? Here in Nadvornaya, of course!" was his answer. "We came together."

First he asked for forgiveness on behalf of his sister. He explained why *B* hadn't kept her promise to come to the Sighet station at the appointed time.

"It was all my fault," he excused himself in his naïve and childish way. "I begged *B* not to leave home without me. When she finally agreed, we had to convince our parents and get their consent. Then I had to pack and get ready to leave, so it got late. And to top it off, we couldn't find a *drozhke*, a conveyance, to take us to the station. So we had to drag ourselves there on foot. By the time we arrived, all we could see was a black wisp of smoke vanishing behind the disappearing train."

Oscar related this to me with so much feeling that I couldn't help but have pity on him. He also recounted the many difficulties they had had in reaching Yasinya, in finding the *makher*, and so forth.

I listened to Oscar with much interest. I reassured him that I understood the situation very well, and that I was not – God forbid – angry with him or with *B.*

"Why should I be mad at anybody? I should be angry only at myself."

"If only," I sighed. "If only, nothing would have come of all this."

The cell got so full that we had to jam the cots together. Those that didn't have room to sleep on cots, slept under them. Otherwise we would have been pressed together like real herrings.

We lay with others prisoners' feet in our faces. If somebody had to get up at night to go to the *parasha,* he had to step on hands, feet and heads.

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The food was unpalatable and insufficient, hardly enough to stave off our hunger. Once a day we were given one small loaf of black barley bread for four people, as well as a little cloudy water and some kind of gruel containing a few grains of barley and horse's teeth, without meat.

Ten days passed. I was particularly distressed once I found out that *B* was also there, and that in addition, she had brought Oscar with her. From that moment on, I had no peace, day or night. My conscience plagued me relentlessly. *Why had I left home and let myself get caught in such a disastrous predicament?*

Feelings of regret choked me like a noose around my neck. I was so distraught I thought I would go mad. I sat for hours on the bare floor, sobbing quietly with my head between my knees, as I tried to calculate all the harm I had wrought.

Had I only sinned against myself and my parents it would have been bad enough! That alone was a monstrous crime, worthy of condemnation. All the more so now, did I deserve to be severely punished, since due to my crime, others, especially *B* and Oscar, were made to suffer! They were true innocents. Why, oh why did they have to be penalized for my sin? Who, if not I, was responsible for the pain and suffering that would be inflicted upon them from now on? How could I justify myself to them?

I am to blame, I kept on accusing myself, *for those who came to this hellhole because they found out that I had run away. They're here because they followed me. I'm responsible even for Zeinveleh.*

The best prosecuting attorney could not have constructed a better case against me than I built against myself. I cursed myself with the vilest language that I could think of.

My remorse had little effect on me. The gates of forgiveness were locked with seven keys!

On second thought, I mused, *what kind of fate would have awaited me and my victims, all those who ran away with me? What would have befallen us at home?*

But soon the prosecutor, my *kategor* appeared, and set out to tear apart my defence. *There's a Fascist government in power at home. Hungary is a German satellite, an open enemy of Jews - enemy number one. You could have tried to fight against your foe with all your might*!

But here in Russia, I tried to defend myself again, *God in heaven, what's happening to us? We're under the 'protection' of a regime that has for many years claimed to represent truth, justice and equality under the emblem of the October revolution! We're in the power of a government that has always pretended to be the defender of the weak and the downtrodden. Since we Jews are in danger of losing our lives under the Nazis, is it any wonder that we look for protection in a country that represents the total opposite of Nazism? God Almighty, where can one find a little justice if not in a land such as this?*

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In preparation for our transport to Stanislav, we were taken to an infirmary, and jabbed in the chest with long, thick needles. What was the point of this injection? They told us that it was for hygienic reasons. What a joke! *Hygiene* in the Soviet prison! Ha!

Hygiene in a vermin-filled hovel swarming with bedbugs, infested with fleas and crawling with lice!

Then they called us in for another interrogation. The officer who took down our statements put all our testimonies, past and present, into a briefcase. On the outside of this briefcase was the word *Dyela,* inscribed in large Russian characters.

The same officer let us know that we would be judged according to *Article 80.* It wouldn't be long before we were to discover what that meant.

One morning, soon afterwards, we were sent out to the jail yard *po dva,* double file. There, in the Nadvornaya jail yard, was the first opportunity I had to catch a glimpse of my *B*. Although our eyes met, we had to keep our hands behind our backs. That was always the rule when prisoners were outside their cells. In our desire to gaze upon each other, we forgot all else.

I blew *B* a kiss with my hand and she did likewise. The soldier guarding us was nervous. He had to show his superiors that he was keeping a watchful eye over all our movements. He became agitated and shrieked, *"Ruki nazad!" Let him stew in his own juices,* I thought. *Who cares? He won't die if we break the rules just this once.*

B gazed at me with a Mona Lisa-like smile. She gave me a sad, innocent look. It seemed to me as if she were saying, *You see, I listened to you.... I risked my life so that we could be together...Nu, what will happen now?*

I couldn't stand to look at the expression on her face. It touched me to the depths of my being. I bowed my head in shame. I felt at that moment that I ought to throw myself at her feet, and not say a word, merely weep and weep.

Of course, we were not given much time for sentimentality. A soldier thundered, "*Tishina*! Quiet!" He then proceeded to inform us in no uncertain terms that we were now entirely under his command; we had to follow all his orders; we must be disciplined, and under no circumstances were we to step out of the queue. If anyone were to take one step to the right or to the left, we would be shot immediately without warning! The officer then commanded, *"Shagam marsh pashli davai!"* and we proceeded to march to the Nadvornaya train station. There were about thirty of us prisoners. Accompanying us to the station was a group of officers, soldiers and dogs. Each soldier was armed with a type of artillery rifle.

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We were herded into a simple boxcar. Although the exits were carefully monitored, we were allowed to move freely within the train. This was not so bad. Finally I would have a chance to sit down next to *B* and speak with her.

We were both so changed; I more than she, with my unshaven face and chopped hair. *B* seemed very tired. Her hair was dishevelled. I could think of no words to start our conversation with. I had so much to say, but somehow, I couldn't speak. Should I start by begging her forgiveness? Forgiveness for having left without her at the Sighet station when she was only a few minutes late? For having let her down and gone myself? What a terrible thing I had done! But no! I couldn't ask her to forgive me for that. If only she had had more sense at the time and had given up on me altogether because of my thoughtlessness. I just wanted to beg her to forgive me for having talked her into such a horrible situation in the first place.

B must have sensed what was in my heart and in my mind, and tried to raise my spirits. "Don't worry, my dear," she consoled me with a cheerful smile. "Everything will turn out just fine. You'll see. We'll be happy again one day… I hear that they'll free us once we get to Stanislav. Let's hope that's true. Then we can both work at whatever job we're given. All we need is to earn enough to pay for a little bit of dry bread and a place to lay our heads at night. Then we'll be the happiest couple in the whole world!"

Instead of replying, I caressed her and kissed her. I gazed carefully at her face at every opportunity. I smiled and sighed, smiled and sighed. No doubt she understood what my sighing meant, for she embraced me and kissed me, consoling me all the while.

"Don't worry my darling," she murmured. "I'm not angry at you, God forbid. How could my heart ever be bitter towards you? I know that you did everything with a clear conscience."

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Although at that moment I was completely focused on *B*, I was also interested in my other friends. I was especially curious to meet Herschel Pollack's fiancée Leah'ke and Bernat Berkovics's Fanny and their son. But the Berkovics's had no idea where their darling little boy had disappeared to. They were hoping that they might find him in Stanislav.

I was also very interested to know what was happening with Rachel L, and how she was feeling. As it turned out, Rachel had fainted in the prison cell, just like Moshe and Rudolph. She, too, had had a visit from the paramedic, who took her pulse, said *"Khorosho,"* and went on his way.

Poor Rachel! She looked so pitiful. At home, at least she'd had a little vitality. Now she looked even worse than a corpse about to be interred.

Herschel Pollack's Leah'ke was also very fragile. Thin and delicate, her blonde hair seemed to add even more pallor to her face. In contrast, Bernat Berkovics's wife Fanny was a tall, broad-boned woman with a lively expression. She appeared to be the healthiest of all the women on the train.

The trip from Nadvornaya to Stanislav was very short. We wouldn't have minded if the journey had lasted longer, giving us more of an opportunity to be together with our loved ones. After only an hour, we arrived in Stanislav. We'd hardly had a chance to be together for a few brief moments, and already we had to part.

As we stepped off the train at the Stanislav station, we were taken over by the same troop of soldiers that had led us through Nadvornaya, and we followed the same procedure along the streets of Stanislav.

I managed to position myself so I that could walk next to *B*, and took this opportunity to discuss important matters with her.

"It doesn't look to me like we're going to be released any time soon." I whispered. "They're treating us like hardened criminals about to be sent into exile. I have a feeling, my dear, that we'll be separated – who knows for how long. Anyway I don't know when we'll have the chance to be together again, so let's talk."

A soldier noticed us conversing and shouted, "Shut up, you vermin!"

Despite his admonition, I began to speak again at the first available opportunity.

"If they interrogate us again in Stanislav, and if they ask you if there's anything you want, tell them that you have but one request – to be together with your fiancé and your younger brother. Oscar's only a teenager, and he needs special attention. The three of us have nobody, no relatives or friends, in Soviet Russia. That's why we have to be together… Oscar and I will make the same request."

B asked me to take care of her brother. "Oscar's, so young, so inexperienced, poor thing. It's a real shame. He's such an innocent soul."

"Take care of yourself and think about me. "

"You too, my darling, take care of yourself. I'll be thinking of you always," she replied.

As we marched along the streets of Stanislav, civilians stopped to gape at us, as if we were an odd spectacle. It was about eight o'clock in the morning, an hour when workers usually headed off to their jobs, so the soldiers had a difficult time turning away the curious onlookers. They had no other choice but to use the dogs to keep the crowd under control.

On a small street, we passed two old Jews with long beards and earlocks, carrying prayer shawls and *t'fillin*, on their way to *shul*. Herschel Pollack, the eternal optimist, couldn't help but call out, "Jews, have pity. Pray for us, because we're in big trouble!"

One of the soldiers almost had an apoplectic fit. He gnashed his teeth and screamed, *"Blyad', zamolchi, davai*! Shut up, you son of a bitch!"

All the buildings were draped with red flags emblazoned with the hammer and sickle surrounded by five stars. On one of the big buildings hung pictures of the Russian *Politburo* leaders.

Those of us who had visualized the hammer and sickle as a symbol of freedom and peace, were very disappointed; that glorious symbol certainly didn't match up with our wretched situation.

We walked for a long time along the streets of Stanislav, until we came to a big square five- or six-story building. The building had many little barred windows on each floor, and several small watchtowers on all sides. All around it were armed soldiers carrying rifles and ammunition.

No doubt about it: There it was – a new prison.

As soon as we entered the jail yard, they immediately ordered the men and women to separate. I hurriedly said goodbye to *B*, and kissed her passionately. I don't know how long we would have embraced if we hadn't been interrupted. They certainly didn't give us much of a chance to bid each other farewell.

The command for men and women to separate came so suddenly that many couples and other relatives and good friends had no opportunity to say goodbye at all. Men had to turn to the wall at once, with their hands behind their backs. We stood thus, and said goodbye with our glances to our dear ones, as we saw them being taken away from us. My eyes and *B*'s met again, as I silently murmured, "Be well, my darling."

For many couples, these silent looks were to be the last chance they would ever have to behold their loved ones.

Chapter 13 - The Horse's Plight

No sooner had they taken us into the corridor of the Stanislav prison, than the real segregation began. They divided us into all kinds of categories, and then the NKVD examined us. They performed a complete body search – our mouths, our ears, even our private parts, as if they were dealing with professional espionage agents. As we were to find out later, this was the way the Soviets operated.

Their efforts were in vain. All our precious personal possessions had been confiscated long ago. They had already stripped us to the bone.

Finally, we survived this, too. A door opened, and without warning, an unseen hand pushed us somewhere. All of a sudden, I found myself in a little room full of human-like creatures.

"Where am I in this world?" I almost cried out.

Never in my life will I forget this scene!

The faces of these creatures were hairy; they looked like wild jungle beasts. They were almost naked, their bodies filthy and emaciated. Bundles of dirty rags were strewn all over the floor. Some of the inmates sat on their bundles, while others lay down and

used them as pillows. The convicts were angry and wild-looking; they shoved and screamed profanities at each other. This was a scene of total bedlam, like an inn filled with drunkards, or an insane asylum.

This was obviously not an inn. So it must be a madhouse. *Am I crazy, or what?* I thought to myself. *Is that why they put me here? That's it! I must be out of my mind. If I were sane, what would I be doing in such a hellhole?*

At that point in time, I couldn't help but to come to the same conclusion as the Yiddish fabler, Eliezer Steinbarg in his tale, "The Horse and the Whip."

"Not barley nor oats have I eaten this day;

My body is racked and writhing with pain.

Were you to suffer and languish as I,

Surely the force of your lashings would wane."

The whip is deaf to these sorrowful cries.

The horse's plight moves her not in the least.

A whip is made for flogging and beating.

'Tis not of the sort to heed a poor beast.

"Silence!" comes a tongue-lashing from the whip.

"'Tis true," she declares at a sharp, rapid clip.

"To haul such a yoke is an arduous task,

And on an empty belly, no less.

Yet I will continue to strike you and thrash you

Until you expire. Oh, yes!

Now hear well the secret that I shall impart. –

Why do I whip you day after day?

'Tis not that you don't haul your load well enough,

Nor drag your poor carcass the suitable way.

Your head chopped off, you half-witted beast,

Is a fate you deserve, and no better.

Since you – confined by a dull, stupid mind –

Walked willingly into your fetters!

You earned this fate, you wretched creature,

You got no more than your due.

Until the day that you breathe your last,

Nothing but torture is in store for you."[28]

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[28] *The Horse and the Whip* by Eliezer Steinbarg (1880-1932). Loosely translated by Eva Basch. (A more literal translation can be found in A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry, ed Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, 1969.)

More than once during my eight-year exile in Russia was I to bear this fable in mind. More than once was this tale to become consistent with my own experience as I suffered in Soviet prisons and concentration camps. More than once was I beaten because I had no strength to haul the yoke and perform arduous tasks meant for horses. More than once did I have neither barley nor oats to sustain me. When I say barley and oats, I mean it literally, because many times prisoners were given little more than animal feed. More than once did I especially believe that I deserved to have my head chopped off because I willingly bent my shoulders to receive the yoke and let myself be fettered.

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All of a sudden I heard one of the creatures in the madhouse call out, "Eliezer, Eliezer!"

I looked carefully into the faces of these hairy savages; I tried as hard as I could to recognize the person who had called me. Who was he, and how did he know my Yiddish name? God Almighty, was I in some kind of a trance, or nightmarish dream? If only it were but a dream!

"Eliezer, don't you recognize me? It's me, Moshe, your neighbour, Moshe Veig."

Yes, I did recognize him. He was indeed my former neighbour, Moshe Veig, a young boy, one of the pioneers[29] who had left Sighet at the first opportunity when the Romanians evacuated North Transylvania.

"Is it really you, Moshe? You're still here?" I cried out, bitterly disappointed and

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[29] The original text contains the term *Ma'apil* (plural, *ma'apilim):* Literally pioneer or brave person. Refers also to Jews who immigrated illegally into Mandated Palestine, 'the promised land.'

deeply heartsick.

I was stunned. It had been such a long time since Moshe had left Sighet. Did that mean that he'd languished in this jail since then? I couldn't believe my own eyes, although I was undoubtedly not dreaming. It was unimaginable that people had managed to survive three months in such a hellhole!

Moshe Veig could see that I was so shocked, that I didn't know whether I was coming or going. He smiled under his whiskers and tried to console me. "*Nu*, you'll see.... Don't worry."

I could hardly stand on my feet. Sensing my distress and noticing my pitiful state, he proceeded to pat me good-naturedly on the back.

"None of the *perebezchiks* stays here for more than three or four months," he said. After that they take us to the Ukraine or the Caucasus. Once we get there, they'll put us to work at a suitable job, and then they'll free us."

If Moshe Veig says so, I thought to myself, *he probably knows what he's talking about. He's been in jail for a long time. Doubtless, he's more experienced in these matters.*

A shudder ran through my whole body. I was now convinced that I would have to share my fate with the others. Nobody was exempt; nobody got special treatment; here you were a nonentity... Shortly I, too, would turn into a hairy creature just like all the others.

Reb Zalman-Leib, my elementary school teacher, used to read us the *Shevet-Musar*, The Rod of Chastisement. I remembered how he would describe terrible scenes

in Hell, where nobody was special; where everybody got his portion of whippings; and where screams of, *Mama, Papa, save me!* were in vain... Never could I have imagined what Hell truly meant until this moment.

Although I had never before felt so low, and although at that moment my life wasn't worth a pinch of snuff, I tried to control myself. *It's a lost cause,* I thought. *What will be will be. I have to stand firm and rise to the occasion! To regret my stupid deed won't help me. No matter what the circumstances, I shall have to fight for my existence to my last breath, like a wild animal. Only on the day when I have no strength left, when my whole supply of resistance is exhausted, only then will I succumb.*

Yes, I would have to share my fate with the other prisoners. As if I had a choice? This was a *fait accompli*, and I had no strength to swim against the current. But it was so unfortunate for *B*, my loved one, and Oscar, her younger brother, and poor sick Rachel L, and Zeinveleh, as well as many other gentle, innocent souls. Would they be able to adapt and withstand the difficult physical and mental challenges that lay ahead?

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Moshe Veig was very curious to find out what had happened in Sighet since he had left. He asked me to tell him what was going on with the Magyars in general, and the Jews in particular.

I was so confused and overwhelmed by all the recent unpleasantness, and by the uncertainty which awaited *B* and myself in the near future, that I scarcely heard or understood what he asked me.

"Ha, in Sighet." I responded mechanically, "Yes, everything is just the same as before."

A second Jewish young man, who also happened to be in the same cell, sensed my disorientation. He realized that Moshe Veig hadn't even bothered to wait for me get over the shock, and acclimatize myself to the new fetid, stifling atmosphere, which in time, would become my natural milieu. So he turned to Moshe and said, "What do you want from the poor guy? Don't you see what he's going through? He's so upset that he probably doesn't know what hit him. I bet he feels like a lost soul wandering around the netherworld searching for salvation. That's exactly how it was for me when I first came here ten weeks ago. Never mind, once he gets used to the place, he'll gradually calm down. Once you get accustomed to miseries, you can live with miseries."

After a while, I did indeed calm down enough to pay attention to my surroundings. "Who are those people over there?" I asked Moshe.

I was referring to the strange creatures in the corner, who occupied a much larger portion of the cell than the other prisoners. They were fighting and shouting at the top of their lungs, as they hurled insults and cursed each other's ancestors. Chins pointed upwards, beards jutting out, their faces were so angry-looking, they could have been fists ready to strike. One had the impression that any minute now, one of them would jump on the other and kill him.

"Co za choilera psia krew?" "Niech pana krew zaleje!" I heard them yell Polish curses at each other.

"Those guys over there you mean?" Moshe asked me confidently, as if the answer was obvious. "Those are real counter-revolutionaries! They've been here in the Stanislav jail for over a year. That's why they're as wild in their actions as in their looks. Those guys are in for the worst offence, *Paragraph 58*.[30] What does *Paragraph 58* mean? You'll find out in due time."

If Moshe thought that his reply would clarify matters, he was mistaken. I was even more confused now, so I asked him, "If that's the case, why are we in the same cell with such a disreputable bunch?"

Moshe tried to reassure me, and asserted, as if he were an expert in such delicate matters. "The Soviets want to teach us *perebezchiks* a lesson; they want us to know the meaning of the verse *Lema'an yedah.*[31] That way, when we're liberated, we'll truly honour our freedom, and we'll know that it pays to be a true patriot and a respected citizen of the Soviet Union, not like those creatures there in the corner – those counter-revolutionaries!"

Even at home, I had already suspected that this Moshe was a Communist. But I couldn't have imagined that he would be indoctrinated to such an extent. He had spent such a long time in a Soviet jail, and, not only was he not disappointed in his 'comrades,' he actually justified their unspeakable deeds. This was truly unbelievable!

On the other hand, the other Moshe, Moshe the Red, ultimately did change his tune. Originally an avowed Communist and agitator, he had incited socialist action at

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[30] Article 58 of the Soviet Criminal Code: Crimes against the state. The prisoners referred to articles as 'paragraphs.'
[31] *Lema'an yedah*: literal meaning: so that he might know.

every opportunity, and had even been arrested back home for his Communist activities. Yet he became disillusioned with his 'comrades' when we were still in the Nadvornaya jail. After he fainted, Moshe the Red openly confessed the error of his ways. "Friends," he had declared in his usual oratorical style. "I am very sorry to have to state the bitter truth: I must admit that all these years I have put my life on the line for a false ideal! I had always imagined Soviet Russia as a paradise. Unfortunately, I have now come to the conclusion that we are in a false paradise. In fact, we are in Hell! If the system here is called 'socialism,' then it is only a fancy name for an ugly thing. Indeed, it's the devil disguised in godly garb. If to torture innocent and suffering people is called 'Communism,' then never in my life was I a Communist!"

Moshe Veig, unlike Moshe the Red, had not lost faith in Communism. The other Jew in this cell, a man from Viseu, named Mikhel Wiesel, had had many discussions with Moshe Veig, wherein Veig always seemed to justify his, and our, oppressors. When Wiesel saw how Moshe was trying to win me over to his point of view, he just couldn't stand it any more. Although under normal circumstances, Mikhel was a quiet, humble man, he felt he had to interject in the middle of Moshe's tirade.

"Don't listen to him!" Mikhel cried out just as Moshe's enthusiasm was at its peak. What he's saying is not the gospel truth, you know." Then Mikhel Wiesel became less agitated, and proceeded to speak slowly and sarcastically.

"Veig's words about Russia's treatment of us reminds me of the story of the Gypsy and his child," Mikhel began. "Before this Gypsy sends his child on an errand for the first time, he gives him a sound beating. Only when the kid is black and blue does he

entrust him with the money to buy whatever it is he has to buy. A bystander watching this scene can't help but ask in amazement, 'Gypsy, why are you beating your innocent child?' To this, the Gypsy replies angrily, 'Hmm, innocent, you say? I have to beat him so he won't lose my money!' Now the passer-by is really confused. "If that's the case, why don't you wait until he actually loses the money before you beat him?' The Gypsy is now convinced that the bystander is a total idiot. 'You moron!' he shouts, 'If my child lost the money, no amount of beatings would make any difference. I have to beat him first, so he'll understand the value of money.'

"So, Moshe," Mikhel concluded. "Is that the way it is with us? Do the Soviets have to beat us first, so that we'll understand the value of Communism?"

I wanted to find out more about my new surroundings. Since I saw that Moshe was such a know-it-all, I asked him if there were any more people from Sighet in the Stanislav jail.

"Yes, indeed," he replied. "There are lots of people from Sighet and from Transylvania here. Also quite a few Carpathians and Hungarians. Some came with wives and children, and others came alone. Mikhel and I," he boasted, "we're lucky. We didn't drag along any hangers-on."

Moshe was loyal to his so-called 'comrades,' yet he made fun of those who imagined the Soviet Union as a safe place for a family to build a future.

"Here in jail," Moshe continued, "there are some people who left their entire family at home. They thought that in time they'd be able to bring them over legally, just

like someone who goes to America, and after a while, can send a visa for his wife and children."

I noticed that the cell was overcrowded, and speculated that maybe there wouldn't be any room for me. "I'm an extra body here. Shouldn't they move me somewhere else? Where will I find a place to sleep?" I asked Moshe.

"You'll have to ask the 'old-timer,' the *starshiy* of this cell. He'll find a place for you somehow. But I'm afraid that he might give you a spot near the *parasha*, because there doesn't seem to be any room anywhere else. Besides, the *starshiy*'s a big anti-Semite, and it's not likely that he'll spare you. I'm convinced that he'll find all kinds of ways to torment you instead."

"The *starshiy* is an anti-Semite?"

If Moshe had thrown a bucketful of cold water on my face, I wouldn't have been more shocked. I had run away from home and undertaken this adventure primarily to escape once and for all from the yoke of anti-Semitism, which was rampant in the Fascist countries. Yet, here I was in the socialist Soviet Union, only to be exposed to the favours of an anti-Semite! Should I now go down on bended knee before the *starshiy*, and beg him, *Excuse me, my dear starshiy, could you do me a big favour and grant me a place to lie down near the parasha?*

I was so upset about this that I asked Moshe, "Why does an anti-Semite necessarily have to be the *starshiy*? Is anti-Semitism tolerated in Soviet Russia? How is it possible?"

"Well," answered Moshe. "That must be why he's in jail."

"Yeah, yeah, him." I retorted. "But then, what are we doing here with him? And even if we did deserve to be arrested, no way should we be given the same treatment as anti-Semites and hooligans!"

Moshe's prediction did come true: It was indeed the *starshiy's* intention to give me a place right next to the latrine bucket, where I would serve as a footrest each time anyone went to do his business. It was only my first day in the Stanislav jail, and already I had to fight for my survival.

I honoured the *starshiy* with a Russian 'blessing,' one of several that I had picked up from the soldiers. The *starshiy* didn't like my attitude. Indeed, he wasn't used to such insubordination. I thought he would have a stroke then and there. He threatened to punch me out if I continued to resist, and vowed that he would mobilize the whole group of Poles to break my bones, and teach me some respect.

At that moment, I was as wild as a wounded tiger. I felt capable of fighting anybody. I would willingly have laid down my life to right the evils of the world.

I noticed that the *starshiy* spoke fluent German, so I blurted out German profanities – *schwein, auswurf, niederträchtiger kerl* – and others. I informed him that he was dealing with a person whose life wasn't worth a pinch of snuff, and warned him that if he valued his own life, he should stay out of my way completely, and pretend that I was not in 'his' cell at all.

Wiesel and Veig were afraid that I would create a disturbance. They knew the situation better than me, the greenhorn, so they intervened and tried to make peace. They

told the *starshiy* the background of my arrest, and begged him to have some consideration for me.

"In time he'll get better," Moshe assured the *starshiy*.

"Yes, we're all prisoners here," the *starshiy* thundered, making a fist. "And we all have to be disciplined. Let him be quiet and have respect for the old timer!"

My two Jewish comrades hastened to warn me not to get into a fight with the Poles, and especially not with the *starshiy*.

"Here they're the bosses. They've been in this jail for over a year now, but you're only a greenhorn."

Could I ever have imagined in my lifetime that the world underneath me would shrink so much, that I wouldn't even have enough room to lay my little pile of bones on the bare earth?

I squeezed myself between my two friends on the earthen floor. The other prisoners grumbled that it was too crowded. Although he was awake, the *starshiy* pretended not to hear them.

My fight had not been in vain. I did manage to avoid the *parasha*. I have to admit, though, that if not for my two Jewish friends, the battle would have been lost.

Chapter 14 - My Sorrow and Shame

In our prison cell, there were only three Jews, Moshe Veig, Mikhel Wiesel, and myself. Both Moshe and Mikhel were tall and muscular. Mikhel was a carpenter by trade, and Moshe had worked at Cooperman's, a well-known wine merchant in Sighet before his arrest.

The cell measured about ten by fifteen metres, with sixty men crammed inside. Prisoners lay on the floor, each on his little bundle of rags, in a space, which under the Polish regime, was originally designed for four people.

For us, the three Jews, it was as if we were in a separate world within the cell walls. The Poles didn't hide their loathing of us. They considered us as enemies, traitors sent by the NKVD to spy on them. They were very careful not to let us overhear a single word of what they said.

Although the Poles were 'hardened criminals,'[32] and had been in jail for such a long time, they did have some privileges that were denied to us Jews. First of all, the Poles were permitted to receive packages from home. These packages contained tobacco,

[32] having been arrested a full year earlier, in 1939.

crackers and other goodies, and were shared amongst themselves and the Ukrainians. They never even let us sample a morsel of these treasures.

Besides these privileges, they could also buy cigarettes, tobacco, bread and margarine from the jail store once in a while. Money had been taken away from the Poles upon their arrest, so they were allowed to buy certain goods, and have the amount deducted from their 'account.' We Jews beheld those treats and swallowed our saliva.

The food in the jail was dreadful. For the most part, we were fed cabbage soup, which contained hardly any cabbage at all. If we were lucky enough to find a piece of potato in the soup, it was cause for celebration. They also gave us a kind of watery stew made with smelly salted herring. Never mind, convicts should be able to consume anything! Yes indeed, our jailers were justified in giving us all sorts of garbage to eat. We were criminals, after all. If only they could have given us enough to stave off hunger…

=♦=

The worst time for us was Friday nights, when we would remember what it was like at home. We would think back and recall how we sat at the table with our families, in clean, brightly lit homes.

I would see the image of my mother before my eyes, a white kerchief on her head, a white apron around her waist. She would be lighting the Sabbath candles, her face radiant as if the divine presence were upon her. Then my father would come into view, his face glowing too. He would be dressed in his shiny black Sabbath coat, a *streimel* on his head. Everyone around the table would be reciting the ritual blessing on a cup of

wine, enjoying a bowl of fresh hot soup and a slice of newly baked *khallah*. At the end of the meal, everybody would be singing *zmiroth.*[33]

"Will we ever survive this, and sit at the table again together with our loved ones?" we would often ask each other.

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Wiesel had lived and worked for many years as a carpenter in Chernovitz.[34] He was then mobilized into the Romanian army, and when the Soviets occupied Bessarabia and Bukovina in 1940, Wiesel was stationed in Transylvania. At that time he could have gone home to Chernovitz legally, but he got involved in a love affair with a girl from Viseu, so he remained in Transylvania.

When his romantic escapade ended, he would have liked to go back to Chernovitz, where he had lived for the past several years, but by then it was too late. He was no longer allowed to travel there; the time period for legal repatriation was already over. So Wiesel figured that he might as well teach the Magyars a lesson. If the Hungarians wouldn't let him go home, he would just sneak across the border and go the other way. The Soviets would certainly let him in, since, according to his calculations, he was, *de jure*, a Soviet citizen. As it turned out, he made the same mistake as the other *perebezchiks*, and like all those who had never lived in Soviet-occupied territory before, he, too, was suspected of espionage activities.

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[33] *Zmiroth:* Devotional songs sung at the table on the Sabbath and Holy Days.
[34] Chernovitz (Also called Chernovtsy): City in Bukovina , province of Romania, later occupied by the Soviets.
Viseu: Town in Transylvania, later occupied by Hungary

Mikhel had never *davened*[35] regularly in his life. But here in prison, watching the Poles and Ukrainians pray several times a day, he became a real penitent. He would cover his head with a towel, and move his lips silently. Whether he was *davening*, or *benching*, or saying the *Krishma*, or just reciting a prayer or a chapter of *T'hilim* who knows? Who can comprehend what's inside a Jewish soul?

"Mikhel," I informed him. "According to Jewish law, you're not allowed to *daven* in here. First of all, your hands are always dirty. You know we never have enough water to wash properly after going to the *parasha*, and prayer is forbidden with unwashed hands. Besides," I continued, "This whole cell is unclean, since there's no wall between the open *parasha* and the people."

I thought I was being helpful by letting Mikhel know about his transgressions, but in fact, it was I who committed the greater sin. Mikhel wasn't an educated man, and hadn't known the exact Laws of prayer. Consequently, he would have been exempt from sin, and would have derived much more satisfaction from praying without knowing the rules. Mikhel listened to me attentively, but preferred to believe that I must be mistaken. He looked at me as if I didn't know what I was talking about, and continued to quietly recite his prayers.

"If the Poles can pray, so can I," he maintained.

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[35] To *daven:* pray
To *bench:* to recite grace after meals
T'hilim: Psalms

Although Moshe Veig was an old acquaintance, and we had been neighbours in Sighet, I still felt closer to my other cellmate, Mikhel Wiesel. True, Wiesel had his own idiosyncrasies, yet he was more intelligent than Moshe, who always tried to give the impression that he knew everything. Besides, somehow, Mikhel and I understood each other. I had lived for a while in Chernovitz at the same time as he, so we had something in common, even though we had never met before.

What had I been doing in Chernovitz?

That's a good question, not an easy one to answer, especially for a young man from Sighet who had been raised in the Hassidic community. Suffice it to say that the conflict between parents and children, which sprang up during the nineteenth century at the time of the *Haskala*,[36] surfaced in Sighet in the 1930's. And I happened to be one of those bitten by the *Haskala* bug.

According to the Sighet Hassidim, once a young man went to Chernovitz, he was lost to the community. They knew that he would either study in the Hebrew seminary there, or even worse – worldly matters. "What a shame," they commiserated among themselves. "Never again will he be a fine, upstanding, decent human being."

Not for nothing did a Hassid from Sighet whose son went to Chernovitz, call that town *Tza'areni V'buz*, My Sorrow and Shame.

One day, I asked Mikhel if he had worked at his trade in Chernovitz. "I once knew a carpenter there well," I told him. "I went to Chernovitz to take courses at the

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[36] *Haskala* : age of enlightenment, a time when many young Jews became interested in more secular studies. Even studying non-religious Hebrew works was frowned upon by the ultra Orthodox, Hassidic Jews.

Hebrew seminary there with Rabbiner[37] Mark and Professor Gottleib. Before I was accepted, I boarded for a while at the home of a carpenter, by the name of Pesakh Rosenfeld."

Mikhel reacted strangely, as if I had had said something very odd. He repeated several times, "Pesakh Rosenfeld, Pesakh Rosenfeld. You ask if I knew him?"

Mikhel begged me to tell him everything I could about this Rosenfeld. As it turned out, I did know something unusual about his first wife. And since Mikhel was so curious to hear about Rosenfeld, I told him that I had an interesting story to recount.

"When I lived with Pesakh Rosenfeld in 1938," I began, "he was married for the second time. His first wife had perished in a tragic accident.

"I remember this story well," I continued, unaware of the disturbing effect my words were having on Mikhel. "I noticed a picture on the wall in Rosenfeld's home. It was a portrait of a very beautiful woman, and under it was inscribed in large Yiddish letters, 'We shall never forget her.' When I asked who that woman was, Rosenfeld told me that it was his first wife, whom a good friend and co-worker had unwittingly shot to death."

When I spoke these words, Mikhel, sighed, and lowered his head. He couldn't look me in the eye. But at that moment, I was so absorbed in telling my story that I had no idea of the effect I was having on him.

"Rosenfeld told me all about how this tragedy had come to pass," I continued. "A friend of his, who was a night watchman, would often come over to his house to warm

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[37] Rabbiner: non-orthodox rabbi

up. One evening, the watchman stopped by as usual, and put his revolver on the table. Rosenfeld's good friend, the carpenter, who happened to be visiting at the time, asked the night watchman if the gun was loaded. The watchman replied that it wasn't. Rosenfeld's friend picked up the gun and played with it as if it were a toy. He was sitting across the table from Rosenfeld's wife, and said as a joke, 'Hands up or I'll shoot.' The wife, having heard that the revolver wasn't loaded, playfully replied, 'Then shoot me.'

"Rosenfeld's friend pulled the trigger. Tragically, the gun contained a bullet that the watchman hadn't been aware of. And that was how this poor woman became the innocent victim of an innocent friend."

All of a sudden, I saw tears on Mikhel's cheeks. He then began to sob and whimper.

In short, he admitted that it was he who was the innocent murderer of that innocent beauty.

After he had calmed down, he told me, "I felt then that I was the unluckiest person in the world. At the time I wanted to be exiled and given the harshest possible sentence, but Rosenfeld himself testified and defended me at the trial. So I was freed, with the verdict that this had been an accident. To this day, when I recall my 'crime,' I can't stop myself from crying. Now," Wiesel continued, "that the Soviets have put me in prison for no good reason, I feel like I'm being punished for my past sin."

Chapter 15 - Why Are You Here?

One day, I came out of the shower all wet and sweaty. I developed a very high fever. I felt terrible. I thought that I might actually die. I didn't care any more. As a matter of fact, death would have been my salvation. What value did my life have in a world where I had lost my freedom?

Bathing was always a big hardship in the prison. The showers were invariably too hot or too cold. Besides, five or six people had to stand under one showerhead at the same time, so we could never really wash ourselves properly. The only thing we could do was get wet. The route to the showers was through the yard, and since it was a cold day, and I was very sweaty, I caught a bad chill.

The *sistra* who came once a week, opened the small hatch in the middle of the big locked door, and asked, "*Goryachka est?* Does anybody here have fever?" I announced myself. She checked my pulse and took my temperature, and they sent me to the infirmary that same day.

I had contracted pneumonia, and I stayed in the infirmary for ten days. It would seem however, that it was not their intention to let me die. They preferred not to allow me the luxury of living or of dying.

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In the infirmary I met a Polish Jewish prisoner, and started up a conversation with him.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"They caught me at the border," he replied coldly. At first, I thought that 'caught at the border' meant that he was also a *perebezchik* like myself. It didn't take me long to realize that, to the Polish Jew, to be 'caught at the border' meant that he had been arrested while trying to go from the Soviet-Polish side to the German-Polish side.

At the time I couldn't understand how a Jew, who had lived a free life under the Soviet regime, could possibly want to run to Germany. If a Jew wasn't satisfied with the Soviet regime, then he certainly wouldn't be too thrilled with the Nazis!

"Why on earth would a Jew run willingly into Hitler's clutches?" I asked with some curiosity.

The Polish Jew sensed my bewilderment, but instead of answering my question, asked me, "Where are you from, and why are you here?"

"I'm a Romanian, I mean a Hungarian… and I was arrested because I ran away from there to come here."

I always had trouble explaining where I came from. At the end of the First World War, Transylvania belonged to Hungary, but by the time I was born, and throughout my youth, Transylvania was part of Romania. I had lived for only a very brief period under the new Hungarian regime. Officially, I escaped from Hungary, so that must have meant that I was a Hungarian. Moshe Veig and others, who were among the first to cross over

from the same place as me, were considered Romanians, only because they ran away two months before. So what was I then -- a Romanian or a Hungarian? My status became even more complicated after the war, when Transylvania reverted back to Romania. That's why I was not in an enviable position when asked where I was from. I sweated plenty until I was able to unravel the tangled mess of my citizenship status, and suffered a great deal before I could satisfy the NKVD about what kind of specimen I was.

The Polish Jew was a gentle, short man, with a dark complexion, by the name of *Panie* Stram. He couldn't care less whether I was a Romanian or a Hungarian. Since he had a notion about where I came from and why I was in jail, he observed me with no less amazement than I had regarded him after I found out that he had wanted to run to the Germans.

"Hmm… That means that you're a *perebezchik*," he observed. And with a biting, sarcastic tone of voice, he hissed, "Then dig yourself an early grave, and go lie down in it now!"

"So, according to you," I retorted, "Hitler's regime is much better than this one?"

"You'll see," answered Stram in one breath, "that we'll earn a quicker salvation from the Krauts than from the Russkies. We're sitting in a Soviet jail because of the Germans, and thanks to them we'll be free one day."

"I can't imagine such a thing," I declared. "Yes, it could be possible that the Germans may be the cause of our freedom, if they're defeated quickly," I conceded. But then I tried to convince *Panie* Stram how misguided he was. "One thing we know for sure: anywhere the Germans have set their paws, their first order of business has always

been to attack the Jews. And the Polish Jews in particular are in an extremely critical situation; not only are they isolated from the rest of the world, but thousands of them are dying every day from the hardships inflicted upon them by the Germans. What can the poor Polish Jews expect from the Germans, except more and more suffering? No, Mr. Stram, I absolutely disagree with your false illusions and misconceptions."

Seeing how opposed I was to his viewpoint, Stram left me alone for a few days. In any case, with my high fever, I had absolutely no patience to listen to his misguided theory that the Germans would bring about the Jews' salvation. We began to feel like two strangers, but our antagonism didn't last for long.

After a while, Stram began to reveal incidents that had embittered his life, and I came to realize why he hated the Communists so much. In answer to my question about whether he had a family, he replied that he had a wife and children on the Polish-German side.

"Why are you here when they're there?" I wondered.

"That's the whole problem," he answered. "I was mobilized into the Polish army, and got wounded." He showed me his wounds, and continued, "When the Soviets grabbed Poland, I was very sick in the hospital, and that's why I stayed here in Russia. After I recovered, I realized that there was no legal way I could go to my wife and children, or bring them over here."

At that time I wasn't sure whether Mr. Stram spoke with bitterness, or whether he was really uninformed about what was going on in Poland. But I had to admit that he had a very good reason to be resentful.

"Answer me this, Mr. smart-aleck," Stram said with his usual sarcasm. "What would you have thought if you had been told at home, that just for trying to seek a haven from the Fascists, the Communists would catch you and arrest you? Could you have ever imagined that they would treat you so tyrannically?"

I had no answer to that question. Stram was right.

Despite the many differences in our circumstances, backgrounds, and points of view, we found that we had a lot in common. Indisputably, both Stram and I were in an identical hopeless situation: two innocent Jewish victims of Nazism and Communism. What did it matter if Stram wanted to spin false illusions?

Come to think of it, he wasn't entirely wrong! Did I have a satisfactory answer to his question, about what my reaction would have been, had I been told at home, that in coming here to seek refuge, I would be treated like a hardened criminal?

It wouldn't be long before *Panie* Stram and I were to meet up again.

Chapter 16 - If Not Lower...

When I was discharged from the infirmary, they didn't take me back to my old cell in the Stanislav jail. They sent me to a cell where there was a larger concentration of *perebezchiks*. Although the conditions in the new cell were certainly no less unpleasant, it felt better because it was homier. Actually, I wouldn't have minded staying sick longer. At least those few days in the infirmary had given me the opportunity to straighten out my bones. And I got to sleep in a real bed for the first time since I had left home. I was really not looking forward to going back to an overcrowded, stinking cell.

At least I got a little satisfaction though, in that I met up with friends and acquaintances.

All my friends were very happy to see me. My beloved's little brother, Oscar, was speechless with joy. He embraced me as if I were his older brother. I also met up with my old friends, Itzik Baer Junger, Zeinveleh, and Dudi Goldstein, as well as the new friends I had made in the Nadvornaya jail, Herschel Pollack and Bernat Berkovics.

Oscar looked very bad. He was pale and thin. He had left home in such a rush, that he had forgotten to take shirts and underwear. He didn't have one extra shirt. The only briefs he did have were the ones he was wearing, and they were filthy black.

Once in ten days they would bring us to the showers, and at the same time they would take our things to be disinfected in the *prizharka*. The way they disinfected our clothes was by burning them with a kind of coal scorching process. After a few such treatments, our clothes got very black, and would just fall apart. Besides, our shirts and underwear were never really washed properly, since the only cleaning they got was the burning coal treatment. Despite these disinfections, we were still plagued with lice. Every morning, we would look at our lice-infested rags, and joke to each other that we were exploring Soviet culture.

I hadn't brought along many things from home, but I was a rich man compared to poor Oscar. I shared my meagre wealth with him: I gave him two shirts, half-burned from the coal, a towel, two pairs of socks, two handkerchiefs, and one pair of flannel underwear.

"Don't laugh," I told him. "Even though we're roasting in this cell now, my flannel underwear might come in handy someday. For all we know, we might be sent to Siberia."

Hunger was a constant torment. Our main nourishment was sixty *deka*[38] of bread a day. Sometimes we were given our bread in the morning and sometimes, in the evening. As soon as we got our *payok*, or quota of bread, we would swallow it immediately, just like the *megilla* reader whips through the recital of the ten sons of Haman, all in one breath. Even though we were always hungry, there was no way we could divide our bread

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[38] One *deka*: 10 grams. Sixty *deka* of bread equals 600 grams or about 21 ounces. 15 *deka* of sugar equals 150 grams or about 5.3 ounces.

into two or three portions, to be eaten later, because we were afraid that our poor little allotment would be stolen from us. As a result, we would sometimes have to wait from the morning to the next evening, until we could once again enjoy the taste of a little piece of bread.

Just in case someone might think that sixty *deka* of bread is a sizable amount, it's important to keep in mind that all we got besides the bread were two bowls of watery gruel without fat. So the sixty *deka* of bread was our main source of nourishment, and it was very little indeed.

Despite my own daily portion of hunger, I would regularly set aside a few pieces of bread for Oscar, with the excuse that I had stomach cramps. Actually, that was not entirely a lie, but in truth, the hunger pangs were much more severe than the cramps.

All Oscar wanted to do was eat. His main topic of conversation was food. If I had given him my entire portion, he still would have been hungry. He had grown taller in the last two months, and was now very thin.

Everyone in the cell was nervous. We would often hear someone complain, "We don't get enough air; we don't get enough nourishment. No wonder we're worn out physically and emotionally."

Bernat Berkovics, the huge man from Grosswardein, who had tried to escape to the Soviet Union with his wife and son, was especially affected. He was more worried and desperate than anyone else in the cell. He wasn't just worried, he was distraught; he couldn't stop thinking of his wife and child. Bernat Berkovics was a giant. He was the tallest and stockiest man in the cell. He looked like a heavyweight champion. With such

a huge physique, poor Berkovics had to make do with the same quota as any average prisoner.

Even Zeinveleh and Oscar, who were half Berkovics's size, hardly got enough food to keep them alive. For Bernat Berkovics however, the jail portion was definitely too small, both quantitatively and qualitatively. All his life he had been a big eater. He used to boast that, every day for breakfast, he would consume a whole loaf of bread, a quarter pound of butter and a litre of milk.

"Here," he complained, "I have to content myself with a little piece of dry bread once a day – if I'm lucky."

The Jews who escaped from Egypt called their bread *lekhem oni,* bread of affliction, only because it wasn't baked enough. We, prisoners, could surely be permitted to call our daily loaf *lekhem oni* too.

It was bad enough that the bread wasn't properly baked, but we never got enough of even that rancid fare to satisfy our hunger. In the bread, as well as the gruel, came the curse of the *Toykhekhe*,[39] "You will eat, but never be satisfied."

Berkovics had lost a lot of weight. Pieces of flesh hung on his broad bones. He looked more swollen than fat. He had aged a lot in the short time since he had been arrested, and we could see that he was shaking like a leaf.

I had a lot of sympathy for Berkovics. I saw in him the embodiment of my own fate.

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[39] *Toykhekhe*: chapter of curses in the Bible

He poured out his heart to me. "You know very well that my own fate is of little interest to me. But I can't forget for one minute my darling wife and my dear little son. Such a good boy! Yes, as I see it, I've lost my battle."

"Maybe," I said, "we could try to speak to the *dezhurnyi*, the soldier who stands guard in the corridor on the other side of the door, and ask him to get the *nachalnik,* the prison chief, to give you permission to meet with your wife and son."

"I don't believe that we can accomplish anything with that kind of request," he answered. "Besides, neither of us speaks Russian, so how will we communicate with the soldier? It's no use."

"Maybe we could try to enlist the help of Herschel Pollack?" I mused. "Herschel is from Khust. He's a Carpathian, and Carpathians speak a good Ukrainian. If Herschel tries to apply to the *dezhurnyi* regarding a *svidanie*, a meeting with his Leah'ke, then we can determine if it's worth our while to consider making a similar request. We'll know where we stand on this matter."

"You're right!" Berkovics slapped me on the back enthusiastically, with a spark of hope in his lifeless eyes. "That's a very clever plan. Let's go speak to Herschel right now!"

Herschel Pollack was the exact opposite of Berkovics. Berkovics's main language was Hungarian, and he and his wife could barely speak anything else. Pollack, on the other hand, spoke many different languages. Herschel was a slim, blond, twenty-two year old young man. His two large dreamy eyes blinked often, especially when he was excited. Then they would blink constantly.

Herschel distinguished himself from the other prisoners by his gentleness and naïveté. It was plain to see that he was a quiet, kind young man, who wouldn't hurt a fly. And he had certainly never had any connection to Communism. It was indeed a wonder that this soft-spoken, gentle youth had undertaken such an adventure, and that he had had the courage to take a young girl like Leah'ke away from her parents, and cross over to the other side of the *Sambatyon*.

Herschel listened to Berkovics and me with a great deal of curiosity. He devoured our every word.

"Do I agree with you? Of course!" Herschel was so enthusiastic about our plan that he wouldn't even let us finish talking. He understood immediately what we had in mind. "I myself have often thought about doing something like that," he said. "I've often considered just going up to the *dezhurnyi*, on my own, and asking him to tell the *nachalnik* in my name to request a pass for me to meet my fiancée!"

Herschel spoke with more and more ecstasy, and his eyes blinked furiously.

"Why didn't I do it before?" he exclaimed. "I guess I was convinced that my cause was hopeless, and that I'd just make a fool of myself. I always thought that there are so many thousands of prisoners here in the Stanislav jail, so why would the *nachalnik* agree to meet especially with me? I was sure that he would just laugh in my face. But since I see that you both think that maybe we could achieve something, I'll take the first step today."

When the *dezhurnyi* opened the door and came into the cell for the *proverka*, the roll call, Herschel Pollack stepped out of the row, and humbly announced that he wished to make a request.

The *dezhurnyi*, as usual, appeared angry and glum. He could hardly wait to do his duty, and get the hell out of there. Being entrusted by the Soviets with authority over thousands of prisoners gave him a feeling of pride, but all he wanted to do at that moment was to lock the door on the other side as quickly as he could, and get away from the foul odour of the cell. He answered Herschel, "Talk fast and make it snappy, 'cause I'm busy."

"*Tovarishch dezhurnyi*," Herschel hardly had time to begin his request, with those two innocent words, when the *dezhurnyi* interrupted him and shouted so loudly, that we thought he would fall down dead from a stroke right then and there.

"*Kakoi ya tebe tovarishch*? What kind of comrade am I to you? Your comrades are in the Bryansk Woods!" (That was a Russian expression.) As far as you, and all the others in here are concerned, I am a *grazhdanin,* a citizen. Do you understand? A *grazhdanin*!" (A Russian prisoner was not allowed to call a free Soviet citizen *tovarishch,* which means 'comrade', he was only allowed to call him 'citizen', *grazhdanin.*)

Herschel Pollack wanted to persuade the *dezhurnyi* that he was innocent of any crime, even though he was in a cell together with real criminals, under the same conditions as them. But the *dezhurnyi* was not convinced.

The stench in the cell was so overpowering that the *dezhurnyi* couldn't stop coughing. He ran to the door and locked it behind him. Then he poked his face through the hatch and snarled, "*Ya tebe ne veryu, khoroshikh lyudei v tyur'me ne byvaet*! I don't believe you; good people don't sit in jail!"

The *dezhurnyi* locked the door, and turned to walk away. Herschel lost his customary composure, and became very aggressive. He banged on the door and screamed, "*Grazhdanin dezhurnyi!"*

Poor Herschel thought that by knocking and shouting he would soften the *dezhurnyi*'s heart and thus reach his goal. Finally the *dezhurnyi* opened the little flap in the middle of the big door, and again poked his overstuffed face through the hatch:

"*Chego tebe nado?* What do you want?" he barked.

"Since you want to be called *grazhdanin dezhurnyi,*" Herschel declared, "I will always call you by that name." He then became very submissive. "I humbly beseech you to mention to the *nachalnik* of the jail that I have a request."

"The *NA - CHAL - NIK* of the JAIL? What kind of a request can you have for the *nachalnik?* If there's something you aren't happy about, you can tell me."

To this Herschel replied with a pleading tone that could have melted a heart of stone, "I don't have paper or pen to write a *zayavlenie,* a request, so I would like to ask him personally for permission to have a *svidanie* with my fiancée, who is also an innocent prisoner in this same jail."

"*Khorosho!* Good!" the *dezhurnyi* replied perfunctorily, as he closed the hatch and hurried off.

When Herschel had something on his mind, he became agitated and wouldn't calm down. And once he embarked on a scheme, he had to see it through, for better or for worse.

He'd already done a foolhardy deed once before in his life, in running away from home with Leah'ke, and now he was paying a dear price for it. Yet he hadn't learned that it was not always a good idea to take drastic measures.

Berkovics and I had already figured out that his efforts were hopeless. We tried to talk him out of it, but it was too late. Herschel didn't want to lose courage. Once he started something, he had to finish it to the end. Besides, what could they do to him? They weren't going to throw him out of jail, were they?

Every day from then on, day in and day out, after the *proverka*, Herschel would pound on the door. The *dezhurnyi* got fed up, and didn't want to listen anymore. He would just lock the door from the outside, and walk away. The soldier already knew who was knocking and for what reason. Let him knock.

One day, when the watch changed, there was a new *dezhurnyi* replacing the regular one. Suspicious of the constant banging, he opened the hatch and shouted, "Who dares to knock on the door constantly?"

"Several days ago I demanded to see the *nachalnik,"* answered Herschel boldly, "and I haven't received an answer yet."

"If the *nachalnik* comes, he'll come without your knocking," the soldier answered, and hastily closed the hatch.

Herschel didn't stop pounding on the door. It often took a long time before he got a response, and when a *dezhurnyi* finally came, he would open the little door, just to get him to stop banging, and we would hear the same refrain, word for word, in the request and in the answer.

Herschel caused such a disturbance for so long, that he finally succeeded in his quest to see the *nachalnik.* But instead of granting Herschel's request to have a *svidanie* with his beloved, the *nachalnik* gave him three days *kartzer,* solitary confinement, for breaking the discipline of the jail and for disturbing the peace of the other prisoners.

Berkovics and I were already very sorry that we had incited Herschel to undertake such a scheme. We blamed ourselves for not holding Herschel back with all our strength, after we noticed that his cause was hopeless.

"He's a poor, innocent martyr of our foolishness," we berated ourselves. "It's all our fault!"

We could hardly wait for Herschel to return to the cell. When he finally came back from the *kartzer*, we could barely recognize him; indeed, he was more dead than alive. All his limbs were trembling. Three days he had spent in a cold, tiny cell somewhere in the cellar; he had lain on a cement floor without a blanket, and had received a *shtrafnoi payok,* a punishment portion: thirty *deka* of bread per day, with no soup or even water.

As soon as Herschel re-entered the cell, Berkovics and I came over to him, and begged his forgiveness for having talked him into doing something that ended up causing him needless pain. But Herschel wouldn't let us finish.

"I had to do it, to be sure about where I stand in the world," he sighed. "Otherwise, I would always blame myself for not having done everything possible to find out how my Leah'ke is doing. Nothing in the world would be too difficult for me when it comes to her."

He then curled himself up into a little ball, buried his face in his little bundle of rags, and started to whimper like a small child. We all felt so sorry for him, we wanted to do likewise.

"So now," Moshe the Red said, in his customary oratorical manner, "there is no longer a glimmer of doubt about the fact that we are completely and totally lowly prisoners."

"If not lower."[40]

That last remark came from my friend, the intellectual, Itzik Baer Junger. We all wondered how he could still retain his clever wit at a time when we all felt like crying.

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[40] Itzik Baer Junger was referring to the short story *If Not Higher* by I.L. Peretz. It is a tale of a rabbi, who disappears every Friday morning at the time of the Penitential Prayers. His disciples believe that he ascends to heaven to intercede on their behalf. A sceptic follows the rabbi, and discovers that the rabbi, disguised as a peasant, goes to take care of a poor, old, sick widow. Thereafter, upon hearing the rabbi's followers claim that he has gone to heaven, the former sceptic whispers, 'If not higher.'

Chapter 17 - Entangled in a Net

All inmates of the Stanislav jail had to undergo another interrogation. A soldier summoned me from the cell, and commanded, "*Ruki nazad!*" I was already very familiar with the meaning of those two words, which are actually the ABC's of arrested life in Russia, and I acquiesced.

The soldier took me through doors and gates, from one corridor to another, and from one fortification to another. I walked ahead and the soldier followed, shouting orders. "Right, left, turn to the wall!"

He would order me to face the wall whenever he heard footsteps. Footsteps indicated that that someone was approaching. It could be another convict, and according to regulations, we were not allowed to meet other prisoners outside our own cell.

On a previous occasion, I had noticed a soldier standing in such a way as to block a prisoner from view as he was facing the wall, so that he could not see or be seen.

First they sequestered me in a *kartzer,* a cell the size of a telephone booth. Then they brought me to the *sledovatel,* the interrogator. They kept me in the *kartzer* so that I wouldn't be able to meet up with anybody until the *sledovatel* was ready to see me.

The *sledovatel*, a dark, skinny little man, looked like a Caucasian, but from his appearance, I guessed that he was a Jew. On the table in front of him was a mirror, placed such that he would be able to watch all my movements, without having to look directly into my face.

The *sledovatel* asked me in broken Yiddish, "*You had-meet go cruss porr-ter?*" What he meant was, "You admit you crossed the border?"

I had trouble figuring out what he was trying to say. He repeated the same phrase, word for word. Finally, I understood the question. Once he saw that I was a maven, and I admitted that I did indeed *go cruss porr-ter,* he said, with some satisfaction, as if to compliment me for my disclosure, "Good, good." Then he added, "What do your parents do?"

"My parents aren't doing anything right now," I replied sadly. "They've lost their livelihood because of the Hungarians."

I began to tell the *sledovatel* that the Magyars had taken away my parents' license, which automatically deprived them of every means of earning their living. But that fact was of no interest to him. He wanted me to answer only the questions that were put to me.

"Why did you come to the Soviet Union?" he asked me again. I could tell by the intense expression on his face that this was a very important question at the *dapros,* the hearing.

"For two reasons," I replied confidently, as if I had known in advance what I would be asked. "Firstly, because I didn't want to be an active accomplice in the Fascist army. And secondly, because I was in danger of being arrested for having resisted the Fascist hordes and their hooligan activities."

"What do you plan to do here?"

"Work at whatever job I can."

"Do you have any brothers and sisters?"

I did tell him exactly how many brothers and sisters I had, how old they were, and where they lived. When I told him the truth – that I also had two brothers and two sisters in America – he grumbled, "To what party did you belong?"

"I haven't belonged to any party lately, because all parties, except the Fascist party, were forbidden in Hungary. Before that I was a member of the Zionist party."

At this point, the investigator stopped me and demanded details. Who was the leader of the Zionist party in Sighet? Was I aware of anyone in this jail who was also a member of the Zionist party? To these questions, I simply stated that I didn't know.

"Your last wish?"

"My last wish would be for me to be together with my fiancée and her younger brother. We have nobody in the Soviet Union. That's why I'm begging you to assign us to work together."

At this point, he took out a picture of *B*, and asked me whether this was the person I had in mind. I nodded my head.

"Do you have anything to say about your acquaintances in jail?"

The *sledovatel* wanted me to give him ammunition that would betray my colleagues. He wanted me to tell him which of my friends in jail had belonged to the Zionist party.

"Just as I was not afraid to admit that I was a Zionist," I answered, "so I would not be afraid to tell you about others who belonged to the same party. But as far as I know, there's nobody in the cell who was an active Zionist."

I knew very well that, to the Soviets, belonging to the Zionist party was not a virtue. I was aware that the Russians were interested in having the Jews go to Birobidzhan, not the Holy Land. Yet I had subconsciously experienced great satisfaction from admitting that I was a Zionist. In any case, even if I had tried to deny it, the *sledovatel* would most likely not have believed me.

At the end, I told him that I did, in fact, have some information to give him about my friends in the Stanislav jail.

"Rachel L, the girl who came together with me to the Soviet Union, came because she's very sick and from a poor home," I said. "She didn't have the financial means back home to be cured of her illness. I'm informed that, unless she gets the proper treatment as soon as possible, her life is in great danger."

The *sledovatel* was not very pleased with my remarks, and interrupted, "That's not the kind of information I was looking for."

After I had signed all my depositions and confessions, they brought me back to the cell. I had been well treated by the *sledovatel*, compared to some other members of my group, who had been tortured. Many of them had been beaten without mercy, so that they would admit to a host of uncommitted crimes. For some reason, my *sledovatel* hadn't mistreated me. It seemed to me as if I had been the one arguing with him, instead of the other way around.

=♦=

After I had spent three months in the Stanislav jail, all the *perebezchiks* were taken to a transit cell. Hundreds of prisoners, from various cells, were assembled together, in preparation for the next stage of our sentence.

Where would they transport all these people?

Nobody knew.

Some were of the opinion that we were being taken to the Ukraine, and from there we would be set free. Everyone would have liked to be an optimist. Most of us, however, were pretty sure that we were far from being liberated. Yet we preferred to delude ourselves. What value life without freedom?

But since they injected us again with long thick needles, pumping a generous dose of serum into our chests; and since they tightly controlled each of us, even cutting the buckles off our pants; and since they transported us to the train station in black closed vehicles, called *chyornaya vorona,* black crows; and since they led us to train cars under the watchful eye of a large group of armed soldiers, accompanied by big angry dogs that barked incessantly; and since they herded us into cold *teplushkas,* cattle cars – the last spark of hope that we would be freed, disappeared.

The *sobachnik,* the main dog handler, sicked a dog on Herschel Pollack. It bit Herschel so fiercely that the blood flowed through his pants. Why did the *sobachnik* do it? Because he felt like it. Let everybody see that the dogs could bite for real, if anyone should so much as attempt to escape!

Some people just have all the bad luck. Poor Herschel – why did that have to happen precisely to him, of all people?

Now, more than ever, we all felt that we had got ourselves entangled in a net from which we would never be able to extricate ourselves.

By the time they herded us into the cattle cars, it was nighttime. Every car was as dark as Egypt during the time of the plague of darkness. We couldn't see one another. We had to feel our way. We lay down on the wooden bunks, without knowing who was beside us. I now truly understood what the rabbi back home had meant when he had taught us the verse in Exodus, *There was a thick darkness over the land of Egypt, even darkness which could be felt.*

It was the middle of February 1941. The boxcar was not heated, and very soon we felt a terrible chill in all our bones. It was so cold we couldn't fall asleep. Until now, we had been accustomed to the warm, damp air in our cells. Each cell had barred windows, covered with *zanaveska*, a kind of opaque netting. The windows of our jail cell had always been left open, even during the most severe frost, and hot steam blew constantly through the windows, like at a steam bath. We would walk around our cells half naked.

Now we felt as if they had taken us out of a sauna and placed us in an ice cellar.

We braided together our bundles and tried to wrap them around us, in the hope that this would make us warmer. We put on all our rags and tatters. I even put on my flannel underwear, to no avail. The boxcar wasn't heated, and the frost carried out its mission with a vengeance.

There were fifty of us in the rail car. For the most part, we didn't know one another. We only saw each other in the morning, when day broke. We were sorted according to the whim of the NKVD. They had shuffled us like a deck of cards – the

cards remain the same, yet they are mixed up. They probably wanted to prevent prisoners from getting to know each other too well and working out a plan of escape. It was healthier for the NKVD to have their captives separated. Yet each car had a few people who knew each other from before.

When we looked out in the morning through the small barred window of the train car, we saw only rows of railway tracks carrying trains full of prisoners, back and forth. Some cattle cars across from us were full of cows, oxen and horses. The animals, too, stared out through windows like ours, and our eyes met.

Since the animals were not human, they had privileges. Their windows were not barred like ours. The animals staring at us looked like they wanted to moo and neigh. Perhaps they were relieved to see that they were not alone on the market. Maybe they were also cold and would have liked to ask in their animal language for us to have pity and arrange for them be taken to a warm stable.

How could we let the animals know that we could have used a warm stable ourselves?

Our train got derailed onto a side line, maybe due to the evil eye. We noticed that women bundled in Turkish shawls were scurrying around the wagons and wiping their eyes. A soldier threatened them and shooed them away like dogs.

The train didn't move at all the first day. We were kept near the station for over twenty-four hours. At first, they didn't give us any food. On the second day, we received one small loaf of frozen bread per four people, along with a portion of salted herring.

We were stiff from the cold, but we were still very hungry. Indeed, coldness doesn't reduce one's need for food. Cold is one thing, and hunger is something else entirely. (I was reminded of the story of the gypsy, who, when asked when he was cold and hungry, what he would most like to have at that moment, replied 'I'd like to eat a big slab of *hot* fried bacon.')

We devoured our chunk of bread and salted herring as if they were a delicious feast. The real miseries started when the train, with its live cargo, started to move. We began to feel unbearably thirsty, but there was no water. Cold and hunger may constitute an unpleasant combination, but cold combined with thirst is doubly difficult to bear. We felt like wild stallions, with rings around our noses, being led, kicking and whinnying, to be shod. The thirst made us forget the hunger and the cold. Our teeth and palates were so dry that we could hardly breathe. We suffered like sick, mangy dogs.

We had to wait another day and night until we finally got some water, but in the meantime, we got hungry again, and were given more bread and herring. Once we had eaten and satisfied our hunger, we became thirsty again. Once more we had no water, and again we had to wait another day and night, until they finally took pity on us and let us have a few drops of water.

As for as washing our hands and face, forget it. We'd got used to the filth for a long time now. We were even getting accustomed to hunger and cold, but no way could we get used to the thirst.

At last, the NKVD felt sorry for us, and a soldier gave us a pail of coals, but not enough kindling, to start a fire. We tried to break off pieces from the planks of wood that

we used to sleep on. It wasn't easy to tear off bits of wood with only our bare hands, but we did it, and with much difficulty, we started a fire in the little furnace in the train car.

We had been given very poor quality coal, and we could barely feel any heat at all. Just the thought that we did get something, and that it was actually burning, gave us a little cold comfort.

=♦=

Rudolph Weiss, the 'chemical engineer,' was with me in the same boxcar. He wasn't eating, he wasn't drinking – he was barely alive. His face was white as chalk. I was very worried about him.

I saw that he looked like a flame about to go out, so I asked, "Rudolph, what is it with you?" In truth, we all looked like half extinguished candles, but each person was so wrapped up in his own suffering, that we could seldom tell the difference between one person and another. Rudolph Weiss was in such a bad state, I noticed that he looked especially unwell.

"Rudolph, what's the matter with you?" I asked him again.

"Hmm, nutting." He spoke weakly and reluctantly, exactly like when he had fainted on the way to our misfortune, and exactly like when he had fallen and fainted a second time, in his first days at the Nadvornaya jail.

"I only feel weak."

I wouldn't leave him alone.

"Rudolph, have courage and hold on. Eat something and drink some water. If you won't eat and drink the little bit that you're given, you're doomed! You have to take care of yourself; nobody else can take care of you."

My words had no effect. He was totally disinterested in everything I said. I doubt that he even heard me. He lay on a board bunk, breathing heavily and saying nothing. I took his wrist and felt his brow. His pulse was racing and his forehead was burning like a straw roof on a hot summer's day. I worried about his behaviour and his indifference to his own welfare. I was afraid that he would lose the last little bit of strength he had left. How could I help him? I had once come to his aid with a lemon – but that was then. What could I do now? Any action would be futile. The wheels of the train turned fast and furious, like Rudolph's pulse. And there was nothing at all that I could do to help him.

A Pole who had got sick two days earlier was dying. When the train came to a halt, we pounded on the door non-stop, but the *dezhurnyi* took his sweet time. We heard similar knocking from other cars. Perhaps there were tragedies there too. Who knew?

As it turned out, that was indeed the case. We found out later that there was no train car without a dead body inside.

It was near the Ternopol station when the *dezhurnyi* opened the door. The Pole was already dead, but the *dezhurnyi* didn't bat an eye when we told him we had a corpse in the boxcar. It was no big deal to him.

A friend of the dead man told us that he was in fact from Ternopol.

I looked into everybody's face, and wondered who would be next. I happened to see my first *starshiy,* the Pole who had wanted to place me near the *parasha* in the Stanislav jail. He recognized me too, and greeted me in German like an old friend. "You're here too?" I asked him.

"Yes," he answered. "We're all doomed on this death train."

The Pole was right. Seven days into our trip, death claimed a second victim in our boxcar. Rudolph Weiss passed away just before Kiev. I, together with some other friends, did everything under the circumstances to save him, but the Angel of Death was stronger, and he defeated us.

In Kiev they took down his body. I shed a silent tear, thinking, "Oh, Rudolph, Rudolph! You'd have lost nothing if you'd stayed behind with the Magyar Fascists. Maybe you'd have had a proper Jewish burial. Over there perhaps you would not have been laid to earth in a donkey's grave."

With the Fascists, it was a natural occurrence for innocent people to become victims, but here, God Almighty, if anyone would have told me a year ago, that such a thing would have been possible in a socialist country, I would have spit in his face.

We had looked death straight in the eye, so we became brazen: We were in a life and death struggle. We had nothing to lose now. First we started by knocking on the door; then we organized ourselves, and with one voice, like a choir, we clamoured as loudly as we could, "Water! Water! Water!"

Our attempts got no results, but we didn't stop there. We managed to loosen an iron bar from window. One prisoner started banging on the door with the bar, and we screamed with all our might, to the beat of the pounding, "Wa - ter! Wa - ter! Wa - ter!"

The whole time we were just yelling, the *dezhurnyi* could pretend not to hear us. The inmates in all the other boxcars screamed and stamped their feet and kicked on the doors too. When the *dezhurnyi* realized that an iron bar was missing from a window, and he heard the sound of metal coming from our boxcar, he became suspicious. He hurried over to our car and opened the door abruptly. The *dezhurnyi* knew that he could get into big trouble with the *nachalnik* if it was discovered that the prisoners had an iron bar in their possession.

As soon as the *dezhurnyi* saw the guy with the iron bar in his hand, he put handcuffs on him, and put him in an isolation cell.

Yes, even on the road, the NKVD had punishment chambers.

At every station, the boxcars were examined to make sure that they weren't broken or cracked. Otherwise, somebody could – God forbid – run away. The watchmen had a special method of verification. They knocked on each boxcar with great wooden hammers. They knocked from below, from above and on the sides. If there was a crack anywhere, a hollow sound could be heard, and they would know immediately if a rail car was damaged.

We traveled like that for two weeks, until we came to Starobelsk, a city in the Ukraine.

Chapter 18 - Svidanie

No sooner had we disembarked from the train, than we were ordered to sit down on the wet ground. If someone didn't comply, he would get a sudden blow to the head with a rifle butt. When people are seated, it's easier to count them, and besides, that way, they're less likely to run off.

Afterwards, they immediately had us stand in rows of four. Now we could see what a large group we were. One long column of people, four in a row, snaked so far that I couldn't see the beginning or the end of the line. There were twelve hundred of us.

It was the first day of March. It felt like springtime in the Ukraine. The weather was mild, and the ground was starting to thaw. There was mud everywhere from melting snow. We were ordered to march. We were not allowed to step out of the line, or go right or left, even if there were deep puddles in the middle of the road. We had to walk in a straight line, plodding along in mud holes and water puddles.

We trudged along until we finally arrived at a big courtyard surrounded by fortifications, which were formerly convents and churches.

We might have had the impression that they were taking us to pray in the churches, but we were far from being so naïve. Crosses had been removed from the

towers. Once in a while, we noticed a small cross that they had left up, for old times' sake.

There were all kinds of buildings there, mostly Gothic in style – big and strong, with thick walls. The Russians used many of those types of buildings for prisons.

Although the Soviet regime's main slogan for propaganda purposes was 'Freedom for the masses,' the many prisons of the tsars were not enough for the Soviets. They had to convert houses of prayer and plain old fortifications into jails.

A thick, wide gate opened, and they counted us as we passed through, just like a shepherd counts his lambs. But, whereas the lamb identifies itself with a simple bleat, we couldn't just do likewise. We were humans – the chosen species of creation – so it wasn't enough for the NKVD to identify us by name only. When our names were called, we had to add our patronymic, and most importantly, under which article of the criminal code we were convicted. In one way we were indeed like lambs: They took us wherever they wanted, and they did with us whatever they wanted. We were unquestionably in the hands of *Ashm'dai*, and this king of demons had total control over us.

As we waited in the yard to be assigned to one of the blocks of the convent, we noticed that a group of women was marching through the yard. The women were also lined up in rows of four, but they seemed to be undergoing fewer procedures. For one thing, they weren't kept waiting for hours in the jail yard, but were quickly assigned to their blocks.

Some of the male prisoners who had friends and family members among the women, pushed and jostled to get a better look. I, too, elbowed my way through the

crowd until I finally got a little closer. My efforts were not in vain. I noticed *B*, and called her name. She saw me too. Our eyes met; we smiled at each other; we threw kisses in the air, and that was all. *B* then disappeared from view. Who knew when we would meet again?

We didn't get any food on our first day in Starobelsk. It was always like that whenever we arrived at a new location. We had to go hungry for an additional period of time.

In the Soviet Union, everything was organized; everything had to be written down, systematically and methodically. No action good for the masses could be undertaken unless each specific detail was in order. So, until we were divided and organized into our groups, with a senior assigned the responsibility for our food, we weren't given anything to eat.

We would have been very pleasantly surprised if it had been any different – if the *nachalniks* would have gone out of their way a little bit, and without ceremony, have fed the hungry prisoners first.

They took care of us in other ways instead. They saw to it that we got bathed, had our hair cut, and our rags disinfected. At least we now had plenty of one thing: water. Like the Hebrews in the desert, we just wanted to drink all the time. The water had a chlorine aftertaste, but no matter. We refreshed ourselves with that muddy water as if it were champagne.

We were settled in a big block packed with a thousand men. I got to meet some new people, mostly Poles, Ukrainians, and Polish Jews. I spoke to many Jews and asked them the usual questions: Why were they in prison and since when had they been there?

To my first question, I invariably got the same curious answer from everyone, "I don't know, maybe you know?"

As for my second question, I got all kinds of responses. Many of the inmates had been arrested when the Russians 'liberated' Poland in 1939.

There, in the big block, it felt more homey. We had a chance to meet all kinds of interesting people. Hunger was, as always, a big problem, but hunger didn't seem to bother us as much as it had before. We had learned that there were worse things in the world than hunger. We knew that we were destined to endure a hunger *payok*, so we resigned ourselves to the fact that we would be perpetually in a famished state. As if we had a choice?

We organized ourselves into groups and got together to talk about intellectual matters. Sometimes we discussed literary and cultural works. We sculpted chess pieces out of bits of bread, and organized chess tournaments.

I spent most of my time with my good friend, Itzik Baer Junger. Itzik Baer's mood was definitely darker now. His spirit had been broken by the oppression of the Soviet jail. Up to now, he had always joked about the aggravations and afflictions of prison life.

"We are in a most precious institution of learning," he used to joke. "There's no way to measure the value of this school in monetary terms. The lessons we're learning here are truly priceless!"

Lately, though, he had lost his sense of humour. Itzik Baer began to spend much of his time sitting alone in a corner. He became more and more melancholy every day.

One day, I went over to him, to wish him good morning, as usual. He was lying, stiff and motionless, on his bunk. His face was as white as the wall. I started to shake him and called out, "Itzik Baer, Itzik Baer! *Nu*, so you are –"

I checked his pulse. It was weak, but he was warm. That meant that he had fainted. This had happened before to other prisoners. I splashed cold water on him, and alerted everybody around me. Soon a doctor, a fellow inmate in our block, came over and revived him. After Itzik Baer regained consciousness and calmed down, he didn't thank me for saving him. Instead he hurled accusations at me.

"Since when are you a resurrecter of the dead?" he grumbled. "You probably think that you did me a big favour. Well, I forgive you for your good deed. But, don't worry, sooner or later, I'm going to break down physically and emotionally, and you won't be able to do anything about it!"

"I didn't do it because of you," I shot back, in the same angry tone of voice. "I did it for myself. What would I do without you, if you were to die without so much as a goodbye? I'd have to follow the same road!"

"Besides," I gave him a taste of his own medicine, "you've often said that this school teaches you a lot, and it's worth a great deal."

"Yes, indeed," he answered mirthlessly. "This school is genuinely priceless, but I shall end up paying an exorbitant price for it – the highest price!"

=♦=

There was a rumour that we could write a *zayavlenie,* a letter to the *nachalnik* of the jail, requesting his permission for a *svidanie* with a loved one: husband or wife, sister or brother, and even fiancé or fiancée.

It was kept a big secret, because there were only a certain number of people per block who would be allowed to get this permit. I accidentally found out about it, and started to fantasize about being able to see my beloved *B* again.

At first, I was afraid to even let myself believe that something would come of it. I had heard so many fantastic stories in the jail, and they had all come to naught. Besides, I remembered what had happened in Stanislav. I still had a bitter aftertaste from the outcome of that attempt. Yet, I didn't want to lose hope completely.

Yes, I thought to myself. *Why shouldn't I write a request? I can even talk to a corpse, if I feel like it, although there's little likelihood of a response. So, what the heck, I'll try my luck, and go ahead and send a letter to the nachalnik.*

Once again I shared my idea with Herschel Pollack and Bernat Berkovics. They were both nervous about my wild scheme. They made fun of me. Their responses were identical, almost as if they had rehearsed them ahead of time. Bernat Berkovics was even more troubled than Herschel Pollack.

"So, now you want to cook another poisoned porridge for someone else to eat?" he accused me.

Herschel agreed with him, but I remained steadfast.

"I can understand how you feel. You both really have a good reason to blame me; that's why it's so hard to convince you how wrong you are now. But I want you to know that I've been informed that a lot of Poles have banded together and have written a *zayavlenie* to the *nachalnik*, and it looks like he's actually going to consider their request. In Stanislav, they didn't give permission for prisoners to have a *svidanie,* but here there are chances that some of us could get permits. Let's not punish ourselves any worse than the Russians already have. We shouldn't lose all hope. Come on, guys, let's give it one more chance. The worst that can happen is that we'll be disappointed again. So then we'll know not to take any more drastic action in the future."

At length, Herschel Pollack and Bernat Berkovics agreed to go along with my plan. However, there was one small obstacle we had to overcome: we needed to find a piece of paper on which to write our request. There was an interesting system in the jail. We weren't allowed to have paper or pencil, yet we were permitted to write a note to the *nachalnik*. It didn't make any sense. But if you wanted to reach your goal, the best thing to do was to just keep your mouth shut and ask no questions.

For a portion of bread, we succeeded in getting a piece of paper from a Pole. We then gave our *zayavlenie* to the *dezhurnyi,* and it didn't take long before we learned that the *nachalnik* had accepted our request. The three of us actually got permission to see our loved ones.

My goal and Herschel Pollack's were attained, but Bernat Berkovics's wish was met only halfway. He was hoping to see his wife, Fanny, as well as his three-year old

son, but succeeded in meeting with his wife only. What had happened to his son? Neither of them knew.

B, my beloved, had expected my visit. As proof, she had brought me four portions of bread in a small linen pouch, together with fifteen *deka* of sugar. "I have plenty of food," she boasted. "I'm always full. These are just the leftovers... and I've brought them for you, my darling."

The men were under the impression that the women had some extra privileges and that they were better nourished. The truth was that they were given the same portion as the men – a starvation diet.

Afterwards, when we found out that the women got the same treatment and the same quota of food as the men, we could truly appreciate what a sacrifice it had to be for them to save four portions of bread and fifteen *deka* of sugar. *B* wasn't the only woman who had honoured her loved one in this manner. Almost all the women had organized themselves for the same cause. Those women were truly extraordinary and they all deserved the highest acclaim!

We were allowed to be together for ten minutes only. In those ten minutes we had to catch up on everything that was in our hearts; and had to say what was most important.

We couldn't speak much anyway. We communicated with our looks. We hugged and kissed. Luckily, this was the day that I had gone to the bath, and had got shaved, so maybe I looked a little more presentable, a little more human.

Near us stood a guard who watched our every movement. He didn't allow us to speak Yiddish. "*Po-russki govorite!* Speak Russian!" he ordered.

"What's Oscar doing?" *B* asked.

"Oscar's with the teenagers. "It's a little better over there than for most of the other prisoners, because he gets some privileges. He's working in the kitchen. He carries the soup pots around to each block. I see him from time to time, and sometimes I even manage to exchange some words with him. He looks quite good."

"That's the best news ever!" She was relieved that her brother was safe and sound, but at the same time, she couldn't help but feel sorry for him. "He's probably suffering enough; I bet he misses home, such a young boy. Let's hope that we'll all be together soon."

With these words, she almost broke into tears. Our ten minutes were already up. The guard started to rush us. "*Po-bystrei, davai*! Make it fast!"

We kissed again passionately. We clung to each other, and would probably have never let go, if not for the *dezhurnyi*. Forcefully, he separated us.

"I will never forget you! Give my love to Oscar. Think about yourself, and take care of yourself." she shouted after me, as I was being shoved back to my block.

I took another glance behind me. I threw her a kiss. "*Adieu, B, adieu*!" We wouldn't see each other again for seven years.

Chapter 19 - Sing Oy Vey

It was spring again in God's imperfect little world. Once more the sun's wondrous beauty shone brightly over the countryside. The eyes of the prisoners were blinded as they gazed at the sun's brilliant face through their barred windows. What a contrast between the bright open air and the gloom inside the jail.

Every heart was seized with a terrible anguish. A painful loneliness invaded our entire being. I would so much have wished to be Samson the Brave, and break down the bars of the Starobelsk prison. I would shout, with a booming voice that could be heard throughout the whole compound, *We're free! We're free! Fellow prisoners, crawl out of your dark holes and take flight!*

My fantasies took me far and wide. Past and future intertwined, and turned into one huge flight of fancy...

The only reality that existed for me were *B*'s last words, *Let's hope that we'll be together soon.* They echoed constantly in my ears. But these words were soon to become more illusion than substance.

Last year at this time, no matter how dark the future had appeared, we could still move freely, we were together... now we were apart – so close, yet so far.

My only wish at that moment was that neither *B*'s parents nor my own should find out about our tragic circumstances.

=♦=

It wasn't long after my *svidanie* with *B*, that I was sentenced to three years in a forced labour camp.

The sentencing took place in a very simple way – without an attorney or defence counsel; without a prosecutor or a judge. A non-commissioned NKVD agent read out our sentences. The agent, a short, fat guy with a beefy red face, called us in, ten at a time, and asked us each to sign the decree which he had just read to us. As he was reading the indictments, the agent didn't bat an eyelash. He read them as quickly as a pious Jew recites a psalm. Once the ten decrees were read and signed, the second group of ten could come in. Some prisoners didn't want to sign, but the officer didn't pay any attention to them. Judgment had already been passed by the *Sovet soveshaniya*, a *troika,* or three-judge panel, so there could be no disobeying it.

"You're sentenced anyway, buddy, whether you sign or not," declared the officer.

It didn't take more than a few minutes for ten people to be automatically convicted.

I was lucky they hadn't sentenced me to a five-year term. Some of my cellmates scared me into believing that I would get a longer term, because I had told the *sledovatel* that I was a Zionist, and that I had brothers and sisters in America. Some *perebezchiks* were indeed sentenced to five-year terms – ironically, most of those who had admitted to

being active 'comrades.' Also sentenced to five years were people who had by chance served in the constabulary in Romania or under forced labour.

It was difficult to understand why one person would get five years for having been a plain gendarme in the Romanian constabulary, whereas another person, who had served under the same regime, but as a foot soldier, got only three years. It's not as if either one had enlisted in the Romanian army voluntarily.

One could figure out why the Soviets would give a former 'comrade' a longer term than a mere mortal. Comrades were expected to understand the rules of the party, and deserved a harsher sentence if they didn't follow the party line. The Soviets could say, "A fellow party member –he's one of our own – he should have known better." But someone who was forced against his will to serve in the constabulary – what sense could there be in giving him a more severe sentence?

(In Romania, under normal circumstances, a soldier spent two years in the army. But a gendarme, a member of the constabulary, which was of a higher rank, had to serve for three years. Most gendarmes were unhappy about this situation. They felt like innocent victims sentenced to an extra year of punishment.)

Moshe the Red also got five years. He had been careful not to divulge that he had been a former comrade. He knew that if he had confessed to having been an active Communist, then they would have asked him for a full account of why he came to the Soviet Union, where the socialist revolution was already in effect. They would also have wanted to know why he hadn't stayed where he was, to fight for Communism there, and to defend the interests of the proletariat and thus bring about the revolution. Unhappily,

Moshe had been a gendarme in the military in Romania, and this he hadn't kept a secret from the NKVD. He simply had no idea that it could be a disadvantage, and that it could, indeed, affect his sentencing. Moshe the Red was very upset.

"I always thought," he complained, "that the Red Army, and especially the NKVD, were clear in everything they did. But now I see that they don't have a clue about what's right under their noses! They sentence me to two years more than a plain ordinary soldier, as if I had had a choice about where I could have served? It's not enough that I suffered for a whole extra year in the Romanian army, which was just as bad as being in prison. But because of that, I shall have to suffer two extra years in a Soviet jail. If I'd known that it was such a big crime to have been a poor, unwilling gendarme, I would have said I was just a plain soldier!"

As it turned out, those who were given a three year term, and those, like Moshe the Red, who were sentenced to five years, all ended up serving more than five or six years, regardless.

"You don't have to hold a grudge," interrupted Itzik Baer Junger, with his caustic wit. Indeed, his words were like a bucket of cold water hurled at an overheated Moshe. "It was your own *comrades* who sentenced you to five years instead of three, and they are probably very well aware of why they did it. You leave it up to them; they know what they're doing. Your beloved *comrades* can teach us all how to torture the downtrodden and the afflicted!"

Everybody within earshot understood Itzik Baer's barb. Even though nobody felt good about it, they couldn't help but crack a little smile. Moshe the Red, however, was

pale and discouraged. He was so agitated he couldn't sit still. But Junger wasn't finished with him yet.

"Your situation," remarked Itzik Baer, "can be found in the Talmud. In *M'an d'amer,* there's a section which says that 'sentence should be passed with due consideration given to the severity of the administration whence the accused hails, as well as the severity of the legislature wherein he currently resides.' "

Although not everyone completely understood the Talmudic quotation, they all felt that it was a very accurate analogy, and they unwittingly laughed at Itzik Baer's cutting barbs.

Everybody was downhearted, but no one wanted to fall into a melancholy, so we joked about our own miseries. Now it was time to make fun of the officer who had read our sentence.

We teased the student, Lajos Jaeger, and suggested that he try to figure out the exact number of years that had been handed out during this one day. Jaeger understood the gibe, and began to calculate in earnest.

"It's very plain," Jaeger said, after a moment's thought. "You don't have to have a college degree to figure this out. Three hundred men were called out today from our block alone. Ten percent of those three hundred, or thirty men, were sentenced to ten years. Twenty-five percent, or seventy-five men – to five years, and the rest, a hundred and ninety-five men – to three years. Multiply it out: Thirty times ten, plus seventy-five times five, plus a hundred and ninety-five times three, and you get a total of one thousand two hundred and sixty.

"People from two other blocks were also summoned today," he continued. "And if their percentage breakdown was about the same as ours, we would have to multiply by three to get the grand total. In other words, on this day alone, we have collectively been sentenced to almost four thousand years of hard labour."

=♦=

B was also sentenced to three years. I learned this fact from a girl from Sighet by the name of Esther Huber.

Esther Huber had crossed over the border with one of the first groups. She was a poor, sick orphan. Her father, a shoemaker, had been sickly all his life, and had died young of tuberculosis. Esther's brother had been an active comrade in the Communist Party. Indeed, it was this brother who had talked Esther and her younger brother into escaping to Russia.

"You can't expect anything good over here." he had told them while they were still in Sighet. "The only thing you can hope for is to die young of tuberculosis like our father. In Russia, at least, you can go to a sanatorium and get cured."

Esther Huber worked in the kitchen, so she had the chance to move around a little more freely in the jail yard. All ordinary prisoners were locked up most of the time. We were allowed out in the yard for a mere ten minutes every two days, and we were so isolated that we saw nobody besides the inmates of our own block. Only once a week, when it was our turn to go to the bath, was there an opportunity for regular prisoners to look around the yard and catch a glimpse of someone else. On our way to and from our weekly bath, we walked four abreast under the strict supervision of a soldier. So severe

was the watch that, despite the seven fences that surrounded the compound, and the sentries in watch towers above and the soldiers patrolling below, we were still under constant surveillance.

Esther knew when it was my block's turn to go to the bath. She would wait for me in the yard until I had marched by with my group. She would then walk past us and whisper a few words, such that the soldier wouldn't notice. That was how I could get news about *B* on a regular basis.

One day she whispered that both she and *B* were sentenced to three years.

From time to time, Esther would throw me a note. And, whenever possible, I would send one back to her. If we had been caught, we would have been severely punished, and placed in *kartzer*. In addition, Esther would have lost her privileged position, which in prison, was no small thing.

Thus did *B* and I maintain contact in the Starobelsk jail, until we were transported, – one north and the other south.

The letters that we managed to get to each other contained words of consolation and comfort, as well as expressions of our feelings for one another.

"Don't worry at all about me," she wrote in one letter. "Take care of yourself. Remember: You have to live and be healthy for my sake, and I for yours."

"I am afraid," I wrote her, "that they will send us to Siberia. I doubt that we'll be assigned to the same work camp (as some *perebezchiks* would like to believe.) If only we could be together after three years. Then I would be happy with our fate. But since we can't foresee what the future holds in store for us, I suggest the following: If you are ever

in trouble, and are forced to uproot me from your heart, I will forgive you. I have, my darling, dragged you, who were innocent, into the mud. You don't have to sink together with me all the way down to the bottom of the abyss. Rescue yourself any way you can. When it's a matter of your existence, I should cease entirely to exist."

That last note that I sent to *B,* contained the following message:

"Don't think, my darling, that I would ever in my life betray you, for even one second. I am ready and willing to sacrifice my life for you until my last drop of blood, whether we are together or not."

I had already written a note stating that I didn't deserve for her to have sacrificed her innocent young life for me, and that I wasn't worth it. That letter never reached her. By then we had already lost all contact.

=♦=

It so happened that I managed to spend some time with *B*'s younger brother on one occasion. Oscar, too, got sentenced to three years, even though he was considered a *maloletka*, a teenager. Still, he had somewhat of a privilege, as most other youngsters did, in that he could sometimes move a little more freely around the prison yard. He occasionally seized the opportunity to stop in for a short visit to the block where I was assigned. Oscar had become very bitter. He was no longer the naïve child he had once been. His grim appearance could have passed for that of an old man. By now, he knew full well the extent of the disaster we were all in. Poor Oscar! He was very aware of the fact that, although he was entirely innocent, he had crawled into a mud hole from which he would never be able to extricate himself.

One day, Oscar managed to spend a whole hour in the block with me, and I tried to boost his morale a bit. I knew that he had a good voice, so I asked him to sing something for us.

"Sing, Oscar'l, sing something," I begged. "It's so depressing and dreary here. I'm sure that your singing will cheer me up, and maybe it'll lift your spirits a bit too."

I had intended for Oscar to sing something cheerful and lively. But, in fact, his mood was very dark. He sat down on my bunk, and looked sullenly at the ground, as he drearily intoned a song that was then very popular with the Jewish prisoners.

On a field of green under blue skies,

A poor bullet-riddled soldier lies.

Oy vey, oy vey!

A poor bullet-riddled soldier lies.

Oy vey, oy vey, oy vey!

His mangled body rests in the mud,

From many wounds flows his crimson blood.

Oy vey, oy vey!

From many wounds flows his crimson blood.

Oy vey, oy vey, oy vey!

To his funeral no one shall go,

Only his faithful horse shows his woe.

Oy vey, oy vey!

Only his faithful horse shows his woe.

Oy vey, oy vey, oy vey!

A mourner's kaddish – no one recites,

A candle for him – nobody lights.

Oy vey, oy vey!

A candle for him nobody lights.

Oy vey, oy vey, oy vey!

A mourner's kaddish – the wind will sigh,

A light – from the moon will shine from on high.

Oy vey, oy vey!

A light – from the moon will shine from on high.

Oy vey, oy vey, oy vey!

A raven black from afar did search,

And found this body on which to perch.

Oy vey, oy vey!

And found this body on which to perch.

Oy vey, oy vey, oy vey!

O, faithless raven, you bird so black,

Gouge out not mine eyes, give me them back.

Oy vey, oy vey!

Gouge out not mine eyes, give me them back.

Oy vey, oy vey, oy vey!

Fly now in haste to my mother dear,

Tell her I'm healthy and of good cheer.

Oy vey, oy vey!

Tell her I'm healthy and of good cheer.

Oy vey, oy vey, oy vey!

Were my mother to learn that I die,

She would mourn and wail and moan and cry.

Oy vey, oy vey!

She would mourn and wail and moan and cry.

Oy vey, oy vey, oy vey!

(It took a full twenty-nine years until we found out that Oscar, as well as Dudi Goldstein, had ended up somewhere in Kazakhstan. Oscar was under the impression that his sister was no longer alive, and as a result, had named his only daughter after *B*.)

Chapter 20 - The Prison Bazaar

After the sentencing, a thousand prisoners, myself included, were segregated in a monastery block. The block was divided into ten main sections. Each main section was divided into ten smaller groups. There was an overseer, a *starshiy* for each large group and one for each small group. In other words, there was a main supervisor for the entire assemblage of a thousand men, an overseer for a hundred men, and one for each group of ten. This arrangement was necessary, so that there could be a system for the distribution of food and for the allocation of work. As well, with such a huge number of people, order could thus be maintained. It reminded me of Jethro's plan in Exodus: *And Moses chose able men out of all Israel, and made them heads over the people, rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens.*

This new block was as noisy and as boisterous as a tavern, or even a train station. Sometimes I had the feeling that I was there only temporarily, and that all I had to do was take care of certain necessities, and I would soon be on my way home...

At eight o'clock in the morning, we were given tea, a little cloudy, warm water, without sugar. At about ten, by which time we had long forgotten our tea, they gave us each fifteen grams of sugar. We could understand why they didn't put sugar in the tea:

The authorities wanted to ensure that the camp overseers wouldn't steal any, so they ordered that prisoners receive their sugar separately. That way, we wouldn't have any reason to suspect that we were being robbed. Why then, didn't they give us the sugar at the same time as our tea? That was a question that only the camp administration could answer. Needless to say, this wasn't the only nonsense I observed in the jail.

At noon, we would regularly receive some cabbage soup. If someone was lucky, and a bit of potato happened to fall into his bowl, he would have a veritable feast.

Zeinveleh turned out to be a really lucky guy. A few pieces of potato always managed to make their way into his dish. He would get very enthusiastic, and would brag to the whole group as he ate his repast.

"Wow!" he would exclaim. "Would you look at this! One, two, three, four, five – five whole pieces of potato in one bowl!"

Zeinveleh's five potato pieces, if put together, actually would have added up to the equivalent of a whole potato, so it was quite something when this happened to him. Everyone was understandably rather envious of Zeinveleh.

An extra piece of potato in the soup wasn't wonderful only because it could stave off hunger. The main advantage of a little piece of potato in the soup was that it reminded us of home. That's why potatoes were such a big deal. All the other food that we ate in jail lacked the familiar taste we had grown up with. The bread was more similar to mortar than to bread. It was half raw, hard and rancid. Even the paltry fifteen grams of sugar, which in theory, we were supposed to receive every day, was not refined, so it wasn't very sweet. This so-called sugar didn't taste quite the same as sugar once did. All

the other food, like the soup or the herring, was nothing to write home about. Nothing we ate contained even a hint of Jewish flavour. I must admit, however, that our hunger taught us to appreciate the sweetness and to savour the taste of a mouthful of raw bread and a piece of herring – more than we had ever appreciated our Sabbath rolls and gefilte fish back home.

The *sledovatel* used to threaten us at our interrogation, "If you don't confess and sign what we tell you to, we'll send you to a place where a little piece of dry bread will taste more delicious than a piece of cake did at home." His prediction came true, for all of us, whether we had signed our confessions or not.

Our daily ration of bread was handed out at five in the afternoon. Very few of us could withstand the temptation and wait with our little piece of *lekhem oni*, until six o'clock when we were given our supper. Only someone with a great deal of will power could stand to wait for a full hour. If he did, he would then have the opportunity to eat a glorious meal: a bowl of soup and a piece of herring – with bread! Very seldom did this occur. What usually happened instead was that we would gobble up our dry bread as soon as we received it, and then we would have no choice but to eat our soup and herring alone.

It was doubly hard for those who made the supreme effort and waited with their little chunk of bread in their hand in anticipation of a deluxe supper. First of all, they had to resist the urge to submit to their desire, as they gazed longingly and passionately upon their morsel of bread. In addition, they had to be sure to hold the bread securely in their

hand the whole time. If they let go for one second, or lay it down somewhere on a bunk, or even if they put it in their pocket, it would disappear in the blink of an eye.

Itzik Baer Junger once noticed how Moshe the Red held onto his portion of bread, so that he could actually eat bread with his supper, for once. Poor Moshe tried to talk about something other than food, to take his mind off the delicacy he was holding.

In the meantime, Moshe made a movement, as if to pick a little crumb off it and taste it. Itzik Baer couldn't help himself, and, as was his wont, began to tease Moshe.

"It's useless to try to distract yourself with other thoughts besides food. It won't help at all. I'll bet you anything that you'll be eating your supper without bread tonight."

Sure enough, Itzik Baer turned out to be right.

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The block was like a bazaar, with business transactions taking place on a regular basis. You could sell a portion of herring for a lump of sugar; two portions of herring or two lumps of sugar for a bowl of cabbage soup; two soups for a quarter portion of bread; four portions of herring or four lumps of sugar for a quarter portion of bread, and so on.

Food wasn't the only currency on the prison stock exchange. Clothing, such as shoes, shirts, socks, sweaters, suits, and coats, were also commodities that could be bought, sold or traded. The foreign currency on the prison stock exchange was tobacco. Smokers craved their nicotine, and deprived themselves of food, just so they could fill their lungs with a bit of tobacco. A *pachka*, or wad of tobacco, was worth two whole portions of bread in the prison bazaar.

The Poles were lucky. They were allowed to buy a certain quantity of tobacco with the money they had brought in with them upon their arrest. For one little *pachka* of tobacco, they could get two whole portions of bread, which helped allay their hunger pangs. A 'tobacco transaction' took place in the following manner:

Eight smokers would get together, and each of them would give a quarter of his *payok* of bread to one of them, designated as the main 'broker'. The broker would then exchange the bread for the wad of tobacco, which he duly divided up into eight parts.

I was lucky that I didn't smoke, but still, I was unwillingly pulled into the business more often than I would have liked. Smokers would plead with me to do a good deed – to give up a quarter or a half *payok* of bread, so that the transaction could take place in time.

Paper was also an important commodity. Tobacco cannot be smoked alone, without something to hold it in. So, if someone found a little piece of newspaper lying around, he would tear it up and use it for three or four smokes. Some prisoners kneaded their bread into the shape of a pipe, and when it dried out, they would smoke a bread pipe.

A cigarette would be smoked down to its absolute end. Smokers would actually burn their lips and their fingers, but no matter. The urge to smoke was much stronger than the pain.

There were no matches, but that didn't stop smokers from creating fire to light a cigarette. In fact, there were several tricks to get fire. The two most popular ways were from cotton, and through a combination of a porcelain button and a trouser buckle. How was that possible? I will try to explain it:

The first way was quite easy: First, they would pull out bits of cotton padding from an overcoat, a pair of pants or a prison jacket. Then they would shape the piece of cotton into the form of a cigarette. Next, they would roll the cotton quickly with a shoe, back and forth, as fast as possible, for about half a minute. Finally, they would tear the piece of cotton in two, and it would ignite.

The second way was a little more complicated: They would spin a porcelain button on a double thread, which had been inserted into two little holes in the button. They would then pull out the thread from both sides, so that the button would spin very fast, back and forth. During this operation, the button was kept in constant contact with a steel belt buckle. This combination created sparks. They would keep half-burned pieces of linen nearby. When a spark got into the linen, it would burn.

In this primitive way, we transformed material into energy.

So strong was the urge to smoke, that when tobacco was not available, smokers would dry out leaves from their morning tea, and smoke that.

We would play chess. To make it more interesting, we would play for lumps of sugar, slabs of herring, a couple of cigarettes, a bowl of soup or a chunk of bread.

One chess player from Budapest, whose family name was Adam, was so good, that even when he conceded his rook, he still won all his games. Adam was the chess champion of the block. He always had sugar and tobacco in reserve. Sometimes Adam would play different games with several people simultaneously, and he would win five or six cigarettes at once.

=◆=

Panie Stram, the Polish Jew I had met in the Stanislav *bolnitsa*, was also in the same block as me, Block 11. Stram had aged a great deal since I had last seen him in the infirmary. He complained a lot about his ill health and lack of appetite. In the meantime, I found out that, since he had very little interest in food these days, he had five extra portions of bread left over.

I had a great deal of compassion for him. It was really a shame – his feet were so swollen that he could barely drag himself to the *parasha*. He had pounded many times on the wall, until finally the *dezhurnyi* took pity on him and sent a paramedic.

"The paramedic didn't even take care of my feet," Stram complained. "He just took a quick look. Then he made a sign with his hand and took off."

Stram was very bitter about the whole Soviet system – the way they treated innocent people so brutally. In truth, nobody was happy with the treatment that we got in jail. But we already knew too well that being bitter would help us about as much as banging our heads against a brick wall.

In the Stanislav jail, the toilet had consisted of a big bucket – a *parasha* in prison lingo – so it was very uncomfortable for prisoners to do their daily business. Here in the Starobelsk jail, it was even worse. There were only three *parashas*, three big barrels, for a thousand people, in one of the corridors of the church block.

Three or four people did their daily business at the same time on one barrel. You simply had to be an acrobat not to lose your balance, squatting with your feet under you on the thin planks of the barrel. It goes without saying, that under such circumstances, there were some terrible and disastrous incidents.

Such a spectacle – four people performing their bodily functions at the same time on one barrel – it's difficult to imagine something like that anywhere else in the world, except in a Soviet jail!

For Stram, this situation was even more difficult. His legs were so swollen, he had great trouble keeping his balance on top of the barrel. Besides, he also had large haemorrhoids, which made everything doubly painful.

"*Panie* Stram," I requested of him once, "since you have some extra bread, do you think you might be able to give one portion to my friend, Itzik Baer Junger? He's very weak, and some extra bread would certainly make him feel better." I tried to appeal to Stram's religious instincts. "With this good deed," I suggested, "may you – with God's help – feel better, and soon get out of the devil's clutches, and – God willing – may you be granted the privilege of being reunited with your family."

Stram was a pious Jew, so I tried to play on his emotions. I thought that I might be able to talk him into reinvigorating a Jewish soul. I also tried to point out that there were plenty of scoundrels and ordinary robbers in our block, and that if they were to find out that someone had bread in reserve, they wouldn't rest until they stole his extra rations.

It appeared that Stram was moved neither by my appeal to his better instincts nor by my remarks regarding the thieves in the block. He flatly refused my request.

"Hmm," he replied coldly, "so you want to be generous with somebody else's morsels."

I spoke to him at length, to no avail. I quoted the maxim that saving one Jewish soul was akin to saving the whole world; I suggested that with such a good deed he would

be able to gain salvation in this world as well as the hereafter. But I might as well have been speaking to a stone.

The next day, however, Stram came up to me and said that he had an important proposition for me.

"I would be prepared to give away a portion of bread," he said in his customary cold voice, "if you would agree to buy all my sins."

What an unusual offer! But the hunger pangs were so painful, I couldn't resist the temptation. I ultimately agreed to buy all of Stram's sins committed – knowingly and unknowingly – in his lifetime.

Actually, I had thought the whole thing over quite carefully.

I have a whole mountain of sins anyway, I rationalized. *When the time comes for me to justify myself before God's tribunal, Satan, the prosecutor, will have no difficulty obtaining a guilty verdict... What's the point in trying to defend myself? I'll be whipped anyhow sooner or later... So what difference would it make if this Jewish sinner gets a few extra beatings?*

In the meantime, I'll be able to share an additional piece of bread with my good friend, Itzik Baer Junger. And for that one moment, it would do my heart good to see Itzik Baer grab an extra bite. That alone would be a mitzvah. In the hereafter, sometimes one good deed can outweigh all the sins committed in this world; so this one chunk of bread might end up cancelling out all my sins. That's one thing, I thought. *Secondly, by taking on all of Stram's sins, I'll be doing a big mitzvah: taking a weight off the soul of a suffering Jew. Stram is in plenty of pain, both physical and emotional. Not*

only has he lost his family, his possessions and his health, he's also lost his freedom. Stram has suffered no less than Job did in his time. Let him at least have some fulfilment in the afterlife. Let him feel like a newborn babe that has just been given the breath of life.

Stram noticed that I hadn't wavered much, and had accepted his proposition without hesitation and without conditions. So, like a merchant, he began to behave as if he was being cheated, and wasn't getting such a good deal. He believed that he was now in a position to acquire more for one portion of bread – if not from me, then from someone else. He started to backtrack on the deal.

"For this piece of bread," he said, pointing to the portion in his hand, "I want, not only for you to buy all the sins I have committed during my life, but I also want to own all the good deeds that you have carried out up to now!"

Itzik Baer Junger and Moshe the Red were supposed to be witnesses to this transaction, and had both been listening to my conversation with Stram. Thus far, they had been amused, but hadn't got themselves involved in our deal. Now Itzik Baer couldn't take it any more. He stood up as if he had suddenly become electrified.

"*Panie* Stram," he shouted, which was very uncharacteristic of him. "This is no ordinary trade you want for one portion of bread!"

I had never before seen Itzik Baer as distressed as he was at that moment. "Such bargains, *Panie* Stram, you will not get from a decent person!" Itzik Baer got more and more agitated, and his voice became louder and louder. "A bargain such as this you couldn't even expect to get from a robber at a flea market."

If I had hired Itzik Baer as my lawyer to defend me in my negotiations with Stram, he couldn't have represented me better. In any case, I was coming to the realization that I wouldn't have been able to finalize my negotiations with Stram, even if Itzik Baer hadn't mixed into my 'business.' I would never have been able to conclude this kind of transaction anyhow, regardless of how painful the hunger pangs were.

Until now, Moshe the Red had only listened to my conversation with Stram, and had not shown any inkling that he wanted to be my competitor. Now that he saw that my deal with Stram was falling through, he couldn't hold back any longer. He intervened with the hope of obtaining some personal benefit from Stram.

"What a shame!" Moshe the Red exclaimed. "I'd already prepared *mitzvoth* for him. Too bad he won't be able to use them!"

After some haggling, it turned out that Moshe the Red took on all Stram's sins, and gave up all his *mitzvoth* and good deeds. For one small, raw, dried up chunk of bread, Moshe made a donation and received a gift: he gave away his *mitzvoth* and was given – sins!

The transaction took place with all the particulars settled. Itzik Baer and I were the witnesses. As he handed the bread over to Moshe, Stram approached Itzik Baer and me, and proclaimed, "You are hereby witnesses that for this portion of bread, I have sold all my sins to Moshe ben Michael Halevi, and likewise, for this portion of bread was Moshe ben Michael Halevi willing to sell me all his *mitzvoth* and good deeds."

We didn't actually sign a bill of sale or a bill of purchase (or call it what you will) that specified that Moshe was prepared to renounce the hereafter. (What would have

been the point? By the time this transaction would be put into effect, no official document would be necessary!)

Itzik Baer Junger was doubly agitated. In the first place, he was disturbed that *Panie* Stram had succeeded in getting such an insanely good deal, but he was particularly upset with Moshe. He poured out all his bitterness onto Moshe.

"You must have a spark of evil in you!" Itzik Baer accused him. "Esau was a redhead just like you; and Esau also sold his birthright, his privileges – and should I say, his principles – just like you, merely so he could stuff his face. Esau acted like you and you like him!"

Sure enough – the rest of Stram's bread ended up getting stolen.

Chapter 21 - Bread of Affliction

It was just before Passover. In the same block as me in the Starobelsk jail were quite a few religious Jews, including some rabbis' sons. They were mostly between eighteen and twenty years old and wore velvet hats and satin gabardines. They would wear their gabardines during the day, and cover themselves at night with them. It was funny to see shaved rabbis in their Hassidic rabbinical garb, but we were well aware that their situation was more tragic than comical.

One of the most difficult problems for the religious Jews in the block was the non-kosher food. During the whole year, they had no choice but to accept it. They choked on each bite, but they had to keep themselves alive, so they ate what was given and as much as was given. But it was not such a simple thing when it came to eating *khametz*[41] during Passover. *Khametz* is expressly forbidden in the Torah. Jews are not allowed to see so much as a crumb of *khametz* before their eyes during the entire holiday of Passover, if at all possible. They deserve to die young – God forbid – for the sin of not obeying the interdiction regarding *khametz*. But what could be done in prison to keep an emaciated, famished body alive for eight whole days?

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[41] *Khametz:* Leavened dough or bread, all traces of which are burned before the Passover holiday.

If, on the other hand, they were to stop eating their little daily portion of *n'hama d'khsifa* (shameful, disgraceful bread – in the language of the Zohar), they would likewise sin against the Torah, which specifies that you must do your utmost to save your life. That little chunk of bread was the only thing that kept us alive.

All the other food that we got, like the soup or the tea, contained no fat, no nourishment, and no vitamins. It was the bread that sustained us. We had to ask the question, "How could we possibly give up our only source of sustenance?"

This issue was discussed back and forth, until we came to a decision: "We have no choice." If God had seen fit to bring us face to face with such a monumental dilemma, he would surely accept that we were powerless to resist temptation in such a time of need.

Only one Jew in the block, a Polish Jew named Margolis, had managed to totally resist this temptation.

Margolis was not a youngster. He was over fifty, but looked like a man in his seventies. By the time I met him, he had spent over a year and a half in several different prisons. This was to be the second Passover since his arrest. The year before, he had received a parcel from his relatives. They had managed to send him matzo, as well as some fruit, vegetables and sugar. With these foods, Margolis had somehow got through the eight days of Passover. But here in the Starobelsk prison, nobody had any contact with the outside world; we were much more isolated in this convent than the nuns had ever been.

Whereas the nuns had also been cloistered from the outside world during the time of the tsar, but they had come here willingly, and their whereabouts and names were not

kept secret. Now, the only information available to people on the outside was that this convent had been transformed into a prison. Nobody except the NKVD knew who and how many inmates were detained here.

For the past few months, Margolis had been squirreling away his daily one-and-a-half *deka* of sugar (a meagre quota that was hardly enough for one sip of tea), so that he would have something to sustain him over Passover.

During the whole year and a half that Margolis had been incarcerated, he had never touched anything prepared in the kitchen, except for tea.

More than any other prisoner, therefore, did Margolis depend on bread as his main source of sustenance. He would never even take his bowl of soup in his hand. It didn't interest him in the least who ended up eating his portions of cooked food.

Itzik Baer Junger and I gave Margolis our allotment of sugar or a piece of herring once in a while. But he didn't take them very willingly. He was well aware that in his case it was necessary to save his life, and thus permitted, yet he was loath to accept anything. He was ready to put his life on the line, and to perish, if necessary, for the glory of God. Indeed, he was ready to carry out the admonition of our sages, *Perish rather than sin.*

Margolis would hesitate a great deal before he agreed to take a portion of sugar from anyone. He understood that he got the sugar in exchange for his non-kosher soup.

"One mustn't derive pleasure from a forbidden product," he would maintain.

Then Margolis would remember that the holiday of freedom was approaching – the important holiday commemorating the deliverance of the Jews from Egypt. He would

remind himself that on this holiday it is forbidden to enjoy *khametz,* and that he would warrant the ultimate punishment for breaking the interdiction regarding *khametz.* Margolis was torn between his perception that the sugar was associated with the non-kosher, forbidden soup, and his knowledge that Passover was drawing near. The latter thought would ultimately prevail over his misgivings and with a thoughtful expression and a silent groan, he would take the sugar that we gave him. He would then pour it into his linen pouch, which already contained between four and five pounds of accumulated sugar.

"Let those Jews also share in this *mitzvah*," he reasoned. "It's possible that they may benefit by virtue of their good deed towards me, and by virtue of the accumulation of merit resulting from the holiday of freedom. Then – with God's will – all of us Jews will be delivered from the exile of Russia, just as Jews were once freed from the exile of Egypt."

Margolis had been a well-to-do Jew before the Soviets marched into Poland. In fact, that was the reason he had been arrested.

Margolis was very thin and delicate. He was a little taller than average. His pale, gentle face was as dry as the parchment of a Torah scroll. His sparse, short beard had already been shaved many times since his arrest, yet it always seemed to grow back overnight, as if by some miracle. Margolis' beard resembled letters on a Torah scroll. One could read a lot from gazing closely upon this face. Indeed, the Divine Presence appeared to rest on his face. Moses himself probably had such a shining countenance as he descended from Mount Sinai, when the Divine Presence radiated from him.

Most of the time, Margolis would remain alone on his bunk in a corner, curled up like a turtle in its shell, silently reciting his prayers.

Itzik Baer Junger and I looked after him. We tried to ensure that nobody bothered or harassed him. We, his devoted Jewish friends, wanted to prevent anything bad from happening to Margolis. We were especially vigilant with regards to the thieves in the block, who might want to steal his little pouch of sugar. Under these circumstances, Margolis' pouch of sugar was more valuable than a bag full of diamonds.

I do not believe that I have, at any time in my life, met a person that I admired as much as this man. If ever someone deserved to be called a saint, it was unquestionably Margolis. He maintained his Jewish faith under the most adverse conditions, and did not neglect so much as a dot of the commandments and *mitzvoth*. Jews like him were ready to sacrifice themselves for the glory of God.

According to his friends, Margolis was a religious, honest Jew, with a kind heart and a sensitive soul. But that was not all: he was also a true scholar.

He would spend the better part of each day repeating from memory various chapters of the *Zohar* and the *Tanakh*,[42] as well as quotations from the Talmud. If somebody recalled part of a passage from the Talmud, but couldn't remember the exact text, Margolis would not only cite the precise wording, but would also remember which specific tractate and what page this saying came from. If the rabbi's sons were uncertain during a discussion of a law from the *Yoreh De'ah* or *Magen Avraham*, Margolis would

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[42] *Zohar:* The holiest mystical book of the *Cabbala,* Jewish mystical philosophy
Tanakh: The Bible.

remind them exactly under which sign and in which paragraph it was located.

It is indeed amazing that his memory was still so good after such a long time. When one takes into consideration that during his entire imprisonment he hadn't seen a Hebrew word, yet he had not forgotten any of these things – that made him all the more admirable.

Margolis was not the type who would show off his knowledge. But everyone in the Starobelsk jail knew that he was a scholar in the full sense of the word. Only when he was asked, would he answer.

=♦=

The Seder[43] nights were a hardship for everyone. It wasn't only the pious Jews who felt lost and forsaken on God's earth; it wasn't only the pious Jews who felt abandoned and unjustly treated by the Creator of the Universe; it wasn't only the pious Jews who missed celebrating a Seder, with all its many details, such as the four cups of wine and the matzo. Even for such freethinkers as Moshe the Red and Itzik Baer Junger, the Seder nights in the prison held a special significance. The memories of the Seders at home were like a bridge linking the freethinkers and the very religious – it was what they had in common. These memories carried the same painful significance for everyone.

Even though Moshe the Red had already lost both worlds, namely this world and the hereafter, there began to awaken in him the quintessence of his Jewish identity. It pursued him and subconsciously injected him with sparks of nostalgia for his Jewish roots.

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[43] *Seder:* the festive meal eaten on the first two nights of Passover

At home, Moshe the Red was anything but devout: he was an uncompromising materialist and a tough character without sentiment. All religious traditions and ceremonies, he called 'clericalism.' Sitting on the *hasav bet*[44] with his father, the pious Jew, who had always observed a Seder with all the details, had been a pain in the neck for Moshe, much in the same way that it was a hardship for the religious crowd in the jail to eat non-kosher food.

Now, he began to speak a different language, just like a penitent. "I'm sure," he mused nostalgically, "that the whole family back home is sitting around the table and conducting a proper Seder. They'll be drinking the four cups of wine and eating yellow and brown *latkes* and all the other tasty Passover foods, to their heart's content. No one from the family is missing from the table – except me!"

Itzik Baer Junger, the intellectual, had his own version of this event. "If ever in my life I have the chance to be freed from the tyranny of Russia, the same way the ancient Hebrews were once freed from the tyranny of Egypt, then that day will always be my personal 'Holiday of Liberation.' Each year I will perform my own individual Seder wherein I will relate the miracles of the 'escape from Russia.' The *lekhem oni*, the bread of affliction, at my Seder will not be matzo, but black, raw bread dough, just like the portion we get here in jail. But let me tell you, at my Seder, I won't stop eating until I'm ready to burst!"

Itzik Baer Junger and Moshe both perished in Soviet labour camps. (This I learned from an eyewitness, after I was freed.) I will never forget either of them.

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[44] *Hasav bet:* A seat equipped with pillows for the head of the household at the Passover feast.

Yes, my dear friend, Itzik Baer, you did, indeed, end up paying the highest price for your misplaced trust in the Soviet regime. You paid the highest price!

Chapter 22 - Torah on one Foot

There was a difference of opinion among the religious Jews as to whether we should recite the *Haggadah* on the Seder nights. At the end, everyone came to the conclusion that we would only be deceiving ourselves if we celebrated a Seder without wine and without matzos. The only thing that we had in the jail, albeit symbolically, was the *maror.* [45]

"How will we be able to sing *Avadim hayinu*, we *were* slaves?" said the son of a rabbi. "What are we now, if not slaves? Besides, our situation now is no better than theirs was then. At least when the Hebrews were enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt, they didn't go hungry."

The Christians in the block, on the other hand, didn't speculate too much. They just wanted to celebrate their Easter in any way they could. Our block, the cloister block, was well designed for their purpose. Indeed, the convent was originally built for acts of devotion, not incarceration. Barely had the sound of their prayers reached outside the cloister walls, when a high-ranking officer from the NKVD came running. At that precise moment, the Christian Poles and Ukrainians were in a nostalgic position, bareheaded,

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[45] *Maror:* Bitter herbs, eaten at the Passover feast as a reminder of the sufferings of the Jews in Egypt.

kneeling on the ground and crossing themselves. The officer made such a fuss and commotion, you would have thought that the Poles had been ready to stage an uprising against the prison regime. Needless to say, the officer, together with a few soldiers who had joined him in the meantime, interrupted them in the middle of their prayers, and didn't let them finish.

=♦=

I had attempted many times to strike up a conversation with Margolis, without much success. I tried different ways and means to get through to him, but my efforts were always in vain. How would I be able to have a private conversation with him if he measured each utterance as if it was worth a gold coin? As a rule, he was a man of few words. If at all possible, he would move his body or twitch his shoulder, instead of saying anything at all.

I couldn't rest until I had thought of a way to ask Margolis my question. It was a question that required a response of much more than a mere body movement; it was a question that he could not dismiss with a word or two. Actually, he would deem my question worthy of a lengthy response, and would not spare his words.

I addressed myself to him as follows:

"You would be doing me a great favour," I said humbly, with the same kind of respectful tone that a devoted student would use when addressing his rebbe, "and it would also be a great privilege, if you would make an effort to explain to me how to calculate the Jewish holidays.

"At this time, I happen to be together with a congregation of learned Jews," I continued with the same respectful tone of voice, "and I know, thanks to you, on which day *Shavuoth* or *Rosh Hashanah* will fall. But what will I do if – God forbid – my exile continues, and I get sent to a place where there are no Jews at all, or if I end up simply being with simple common folk, who don't know how to calculate on which day a Jewish holiday, like *Yom Kippur*, falls? I won't know if it's a holiday or a regular day; I will simply not be in a position to tell if it's *Purim* or Passover."

I was sure that there wouldn't be much I could do anyhow in the jails or in the camps, even if I would know precisely when a Jewish holiday fell. But somehow, there seemed to awaken in me a sort of feeling, that if I were to know the exact day when one or another Jewish holiday fell, then it would raise my spirits; regardless of the horrible conditions I would find myself in, I would be able to imagine myself at home, in the glory of the past.

Oh, my! Home... How much I missed it! What I wouldn't have given to be with my folks once more in my life. It was barely a few months since we had left our homes, yet it seemed like an eternity. We all told each other, "We wouldn't even mind dying, if it would mean that we could see our families one more time!"

Almost every night, I would dream of home. In my dreams, my father and mother were both so gloomy and angry! I would have liked to go up to them and beg their forgiveness, but somehow I had no power... They would turn away from me and then disappear in a flash...

One night I dreamed that my mother took away my bread and wouldn't let me eat. My pitiful, black, raw portion of bread... I shrieked, "Mama, mama, give me back my bread, I'm so hungry!"

At any rate, let me get back to Margolis. I had made my request to have him explain how I could learn to figure out when the Jewish holidays fell. He realized that there was no way he could get out of showing me a simple way to figure out the rules of the Jewish calendar. He rubbed his forehead and concentrated hard, thinking all the while about how he could possibly find a way to teach me the whole Torah on one foot,[46] so to speak. Finally he began his explanation:

"Keep in mind these two-letter combinations: *aleph-tof* (א"ת), *beys-shin* (ב"ש), *gimel-reysh* (ג"ר), *dalet-kuf* (ד"ק), *hey-tzadek* (ה"צ), and *vov-pey* (ו"פ). They are a combination of the first and the last letters of the alphabet.[47] These initials are symbols for how to calculate the Jewish holidays." With these words, Margolis began his explanation. He then sighed and continued, "For example: the *aleph-tof* combination denote the first day of Passover and *Tish'a B'Ab*. *Aleph* (or one) symbolizes the first day of Passover, and ***t**of* is the first letter of ***T**ish'a B'Ab*. That means, that if the first day of

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[46] On the run. This refers to the famous story about Rabbi Hillel, who was asked by a Heathen to explain the meaning of Torah while he stood on one foot.

[47] *Aleph (א), beys (ב), gimel (ג), dalet (ד), hey (ה), vov (ו), zayen (ז), khes(ח), tes(ט):* The first nine letters of the Yiddish alphabet. Each letter is assigned a numerical value. So *aleph* equals one, *beys* two, and so on.
Tof (ת), shin (ש), reysh (ר), kuf (ק), tzadek (צ), pey (פ): The last six letters of the alphabet, backwards, which denote the sounds *t, sh, r, k, tz,* and *p* respectively.
Tisha B'Ab: The ninth day of Ab, a day of fasting and mourning in commemoration of the destruction of the first and second Temples in Jerusalem.
Shavuoth: An early summer holiday celebrating the gathering of the first fruits and the giving of the Torah to the Jews.
Simkhat Torah: A holiday, which falls on the day following *Sukkoth*, celebrating the completion of the year's reading cycle of the Torah.
Purim: The holiday celebrating the deliverance of the Jews from the persecution of the Persian Haman.

Passover falls on a Monday, then ***T****ish'a B'Ab* will also fall on a Monday; if the first day of Passover falls on a Tuesday, then ***T****ish'a B'Ab* will also fall on a Tuesday, and so on. *Beys-**sh**in – beys* (or two) stands for the second day of Passover and ***sh****in* (or the second-to-last letter) is the initial letter of the word ***Sh****avuoth*; whatever day of the week the second day of Passover is on, will be the same day of the week as the first day of the holiday of *Shavuoth*. *Gimel-**r**eysh* – on the day of the week that the *gimel,* or third day of Passover falls, will also be the same day as ***R****osh Hashana*. *Dalet-kuf* – on the day of the week when the fourth day of Passover will fall, will also fall *Simkhat Torah*, which is designated by the letter ***k****uf*, which stands for ***K****riat ha'Torah*, reading the Torah, which is what we do on *Simkhat Torah*. *Hey* and *tzadek – Hey*, the fifth letter of the alphabet, stands for the fifth day of Passover, and ***tz****adek* is the first letter of ***tz****um*, which means fast, or *Yom Kippur*. So *Yom Kippur* will fall on the same day of the week as the fifth day of Passover. *Vov* and ***p****ey* – the sixth day of Passover will fall on the same day of the week as the previous ***P****urim*."

At this point Margolis took a little break, and hesitantly looked at me, to see if I had absorbed the basics of his symbols, and if there was something that I hadn't understood. Only after I had assured him that I had committed everything to memory, did he continue his explanation.

"The Jewish calculation of the calendar is outlined in the *makhzor*, the prayer book for the Jewish holidays. Each *makhzor* contains nineteen years. In the nineteen years are seven leap years. The first symbol for the leap years is the acronym *gimel, vov, khes* (ג"ו ח), which denotes 3, 6 and 8. The second symbol for the leap years is *aleph* (1),

dalet (4), *zayen* (7), *tes* (9), (אדז"ט) plus ten. In other words, one plus ten (11), four plus ten (14), seven plus ten (17) and nine plus ten (19). In other words, the third, sixth, eighth, eleventh, fourteenth, seventeenth and nineteenth years of each *makhzor* are leap years.

The month of *Tishrei* is *mole*, which means that *Tishrei* has thirty days; *Tevet* is *khoser*, which means that *Tevet* has only twenty-nine days. The Jewish months never have fewer than twenty-nine days or more than thirty days. *Shevat* is *mole*, *Adar* is *khoser*, *Nissan* is *mole*, *Iyar* is *khoser*, *Tammuz* is *khoser*, *Sivan* is *mole*, *Ab* is *mole*, and *Elul* is *khoser*.

The months before a holiday, for example, *Adar*, the month preceding Passover, *Iyar*, the month preceding *Shavuoth* and *Elul*, the month preceding *Rosh Hashana* – they are always *khoser*.

In a leap year, *Adar I* is *mole* and *Adar II* is *khoser*. The months of *Kheshvan* and *Kislev* are occasionally both *mole*, and occasionally both *khoser*. Only sometimes is *Kheshvan khoser* and *Kislev mole*."

Before Margolis finished his explanation, he told me that I should keep in mind why *Kheshvan* and *Kislev* were not regular and not the same every year. "*Kheshvan* and *Kislev* are deliberately not regular, because sometimes it may be necessary for a day to be shifted, so that Yom Kippur will not fall on a Friday or a Sunday."

Margolis had me go over these symbols many times. He told me that, at an opportune time, he would cite all the quotations from Rambam's *Mishne Torah*, but for

the time being, he was afraid that if he were to talk at length, then I would not remember much.

Although Margolis' short explanation was by no means enough for me to learn the whole Torah on one foot, so to speak, it gave me something to occupy my time with. I strove to learn these concepts and repeated over and over again the main principles of the Jewish calendar.

I was pretty sure that if I were to make an effort and follow the days and the months of the calendar, then I would not make any mistakes in my calculations as to when a Jewish holiday would fall. As it turned out, during all the years of my exile in Russia, I did indeed manage – except for one single occasion – to successfully orient myself to the Jewish holidays according to Margolis' teachings.

Thanks to Margolis, I was able, during my exile, to create illusions about the magnificence of the past, on the specific days when I was the only one who knew that it was a Jewish holiday.

What happened to Margolis? The same thing that befell almost everyone in the Starobelsk prison. He was sentenced and sent to Siberia.

Chapter 23 - Remote Corners of the Earth

We were awakened one morning before dawn, and were given all our food for the day: a portion of tea, a little slab of herring and one-and-a-half *deka* of sugar. That meant that we got breakfast, lunch and supper all at once. But the most important food, our bread ration, was missing. It looked like we would have to do without bread today.

Why was the NKVD so panicky and in such a hurry all of a sudden? Why did they make such a fuss, and get so busy with us especially now, more than ever before? The large group of prisoners talked among themselves, and came to the conclusion that it was because sometime today they would load us onto *teplushkas*, train wagons, and that meant that we would be *wagoned*, and *transported* with an *etap*, a procession of convicts. Where they would send us, no one knew. Some prisoners speculated that they would ship us as far as Siberia. Others maintained that we'd be sent to the Caucasus region. Some Jews tried to prove through Hebrew letters and magical signs that we would be sent to Birobidzhan. By this time, nobody was naïve enough to believe that we would be freed. We all felt that it would be our fate to wander far and wide to the remote corners of the earth. Like lost souls, we would be destined to roam far from home, our final resting place unknown, our last remains lying who knows where...

A brigade of dim-witted, self-important soldiers marched into the large jail yard, singing some kind of hymn of praise to Stalin. As soon as they got there, they began to round up prisoners from several blocks. There were almost two thousand of us, and we were lined up in long rows throughout the yard. In truth, we were under these soldiers' command. The first thing they did was order us to strip bare naked.

They became very busy with us. They inspected us and examined each filthy little scrap of our clothing, to ensure that there was nothing hidden inside. They probed every hidden crevice of our bodies; they amused themselves at our expense; they laughed and ridiculed us non-stop. "Animals, idiots!" they taunted. "You're only fit to be given straw to eat!"

We were already used to these kinds of insults. Truth to tell, the soldiers weren't entirely wrong…

It was springtime, and the sun was shining over the whole jail yard. It didn't bother us to be unclothed on such a lovely day. But the sun's rays exposed the nakedness of our emaciated bodies so that our worthlessness was all the more vividly apparent. After having been locked up for months behind bars and jail walls, now, after such a long time, we had our first opportunity to breathe fresh air. As we gazed up at the blinding rays of the sun, we eagerly sought the single ray that would illuminate our lives and give us hope.

We all had very humble wishes: to eat to our fill, to breathe fresh air, and to be kept busy with work. The last two – air and work – we would end up getting a lot more

of than we had ever bargained for. As for the question of eating to our fill, the answer would end up being 'no' with a capital N.

As we stood in the yard for hours, the warm Ukrainian sun and the fresh air energized and exhilarated us. By late afternoon, there was only one sensation that dominated – the feeling of hunger. All our senses were concentrated on one single thought: bread, bread and more bread!

In the fresh air, the hunger pangs were much more severe than at other times. The soldiers were busy with their inspections and worked steadily all day. They spelled each other off, so that each one could go and grab a bite; the fact that we prisoners were weak from hunger bothered them not in the least. Finally, they finished their job. They opened the biggest cloister of all, in which there were multiple bunks stacked up to the ceiling. Like herrings in a barrel, they squeezed all two thousand of us into one block. There we spent the night, hungry, without having had our daily bread ration.

The next morning we weren't even given a sip of tea. Instead of feeding us, the NKVD became even busier getting us ready for the *etap*. After many hours, they finally managed to group each of us into the proper category and assign us to the appropriate train car. Then they lined us up and called us by name.

One might have thought that what the NKVD was doing with us was boring, tedious work; but when we saw with how much diligence and feeling they carried out their job, as if they didn't mind if it would never end, we came to the conclusion that their transactions in human merchandise must have pleased them immensely.

In the meantime some prisoners began to rebel. They berated the Soviet *nachalniks* and plain officers for starving the poor convicts. "Even though we're criminals, as you wish to call us," they shouted, "we have the right to ask that you behave with us according to the regulations of criminal justice! The law stipulates that you must supply us with sixty *deka* of bread each day! We therefore demand our portions of bread from yesterday and today!"

Those words were stated so sharply and clearly that they must have made a deep impression on everyone – certainly on the prisoners and even on the NKVD. The NKVD officers were never very pleased when a convict spoke on behalf of others when he felt wronged. It was even against regulations in the Soviet criminal code. The head *nachalnik* himself replied in a shrill voice – so characteristic of a top Soviet bureaucrat – so that his sharp tone would have an impact on the crowd of prisoners and soldiers.

"You son of a bitch! Speak in your own name only!" screamed the *nachalnik* with a trembling voice, separating each word distinctly. "Incidentally, you low creature of the human species, it would be much healthier for you if you would just shut your trap!"

It looked like the *nachalnik*'s threats did little to deter us. He could not stave off the spark that the prisoner had ignited with his simple words, which rang true straight to our hearts, calling up all our inner feelings. We became even more agitated when we saw how the *nachalnik* spat in the faces of some of the inmates with his arrogant words to the hungry masses. As if an electrical current had run through our bodies, we all began to shout with one voice:

"We want bread! We want bread! We want bread!"

At one point the soldiers wanted to take a good quality coat or suit away from some Poles, and give them old patched up prison garb instead, and the prisoners began to rebel anew.

"I will never wear Soviet rags," screamed a small, gaunt Pole, as thin as a skeleton, "as long as I live!"

The small Pole was trembling with agitation, but in the meantime, we could hear the voice of a second, who screamed even louder. "Give me my things! You've already taken enough away from me. You've stripped me to the bone! Now you want to take away my last good suit? You bandits! You're nothing but a gang of robbers!"

The tumult kept on intensifying and increasing in volume. A third convict called out, then a fourth and a fifth. "There will come a time," screamed a voice from the crowd, "when you, the NKVD officers, *nachalniks*, and just plain soldiers, will be dressed in the same rags that you want to hang on us!"

The prisoners' fervour continued to escalate. The NKVD realized that this was no laughing matter, and that the convicts could soon get out of control. So the NKVD quickly took steps to deal with the situation. They used a proven method that was typical of them. A gang of soldiers suddenly cropped up around some of the more militant Polish protesters and ordered them, "*Shagaite za nami*. Follow us."

The Poles indignantly stood opposite the soldiers, but this stance helped them not at all. The soldiers grabbed the revolutionaries, crossed their arms behind them and dragged them away from the mob. We saw how they disappeared somewhere in a little cell. We heard muffled moans and screams coming from that cell. The soldiers tied up

the revolutionaries (or 'counter-revolutionaries,' as the NKVD preferred to call people like them). We saw how they were loaded onto a wagon all tied up. This demonstration was deliberate on the part of the NKVD, so that we would hear and see – and be afraid!

Our stay at the Starobelsk prison was coming to an end. We were given an order to place ourselves five in a row. We had to link our arms together, and march that way from the Starobelsk prison to the station. With this system of holding each other under the arms, it was as if we ourselves had tied up our hands… That way the NKVD was surer that we wouldn't run away. Under the escort of a great multitude of armed soldiers and dogs, we finally arrived at the station, where there stood a huge statue of Stalin. There, we poured out our wrath on that unworthy idol, which represented the epitome of all our misfortunes.

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As we marched by the train cars of the *echalon* in which we were to be transported, we noticed women's faces peering out from behind the little barred windows. That meant that women were also going to be with us in the same *etap*.

We were loaded like cattle onto the boxcars. Only late in the afternoon, when the *echalon* started moving with its human cargo, did they finally deign to give us a small chunk of bread and a little slab of herring.

Herschel Pollack happened to be together with me in the same *teplushka.* He told me that he had noticed his Leah'ke and my *B* in one of the trucks that had carried women to the station. He had recognized *B,* since we both had had the opportunity to get to meet our respective fiancées when we had traveled from Nadvornaya to Stanislav in the same

train car. It appeared as if both *B* and Leah'ke would be going on the same transport as us.

Finally the train began to move. We were in the boxcars for what seemed like an eternity. But in actual fact, the train stood still more often than it moved. The *echalon* stayed at each station for hours. Sometimes the *echalon* was shunted off somewhere onto a secondary track, and then it didn't move for a day or two.

What was the big deal, you may ask, whether the *echalon* moved or stopped? Well, if the train moved, it seemed to us that we were getting closer to our destination – whatever it might be…

We arrived at Kharkov. In Kharkov the *echalon* stopped for a full twenty-four hours. From Kharkov we traveled to Kiev, where it was also delayed for an entire day. Finally we arrived at Moscow. By then, it was May the first.

The prisoners in the train car fabricated all sorts of illusions about where they were taking us. Only after the *echalon* started moving from Moscow, and steered itself straight from Gorky (formerly known as Nizhniy Novgorod), did we understand that they were taking us north. We understood this with our simple minds and we felt it, body and soul.

Chapter 24 - Bread For Bread

The soldiers that distributed food in the train cars carried on business transactions with us. What they were doing was illegal, but who would check on the road to ensure that they behaved according to the strict Soviet restrictions regarding soldiers and prisoners? Besides, how could we rat on them, and whom could we tell that they were breaking the law? In any case, the authorities turned a blind eye to the soldiers' affairs. One dog doesn't bite another.

Soldiers bought our suits and coats, in exchange for bread and tobacco. They promised more than they gave, but the transactions continued nonetheless.

I had two suits and a coat in my suitcase. The nicest item of clothing that I owned was my dark blue Sabbath suit. A soldier spotted it, and got so excited that he couldn't contain himself. "What do you want for that that dark blue suit?" he asked me breathlessly. "Just tell me what you want, and I'll give it to you."

The soldier pleaded with me to sell him the suit. I was indifferent to his offer, but he just wouldn't leave me alone. "Where you're going, they'll take the suit away from you anyhow, or someone will steal it. What do you need to drag along additional baggage, for

nothing? Sell it to me, and at least you'll make a good deal. Come on, sell me your suit." He kept on pestering me. "I'll pay you well. I'll give you two loaves of bread and two pouches of tobacco."

This soldier knew what he was talking about, as I was to find out later. But I didn't want to believe him. Eventually, I let myself be persuaded, and I ended up selling him the suit, not for two loaves of bread and two pouches of tobacco, as promised, but for only one loaf of bread. Here is what actually happened:

Herschel Pollack was convinced that our loved ones were on the same *echalon* as us, and I was under the influence of his optimism. So I thought, *"Now, my dear B, I will have the occasion to pay you back for the generosity that you showed me in the Starobelsk jail during our svidanie, when you deprived yourself so that you could give me four portions of bread and a pouch of sugar. Now I have a good chance to repay bread for bread!"*

Until Kharkov, our train cars were indeed attached to the same *echalon*. Little did we know, however, that in Kharkov the women's boxcars got hitched to a different *echalon*, which was going in another direction. Unbeknownst to me, the women went south towards Soviet Central Asia.

I told the soldier that I would be ready to sell my blue Sabbath suit on one condition – if he would take it upon himself to deliver one loaf of bread to my fiancée, *B*.

At the beginning, the solider couldn't figure out what I was talking about in my fractured Russian, especially since I was babbling nonsense about some woman. It didn't take him long, however, for him to figure out what I meant. Herschel Pollack helped me

a little, since he spoke Ukrainian, so the soldier finally ended up realizing exactly what kind of sucker he was dealing with. He undertook to fulfill my wish on one condition – that he should not have to give me the promised two packages of tobacco. Not having any choice, I agreed. The soldier gave me his *chestnoe slovo*, his word of honour that he would fulfill my wish.

Thus I accepted to exchange my beautiful Sabbath suit for just one loaf of bread.

But it was worth it!

I derived great satisfaction for a while on account of this. During the entire trip, I was under the impression that I had presented a wonderful surprise to my beloved *B*. I believed that I had showed her that I was able to be chivalrous even under such circumstances.

How naïve and pathetic I was, feeding myself with such false illusions! Herschel Pollack was no less naïve than I. How he envied me! He described in detail how happy it would have made him feel had he been able to accomplish such a remarkable deed! What a pleasure it would have given him to show the same thoughtfulness and generosity to his beloved, Leah'ke.

On this *etap*, our *echalon* passed another train carrying cattle. They looked at us and mooed sorrowfully. Amazingly, the cows' boxcars were barred just like ours. *Were the Soviets afraid that even the animals would revolt?*

We, *perebezchiks,* were without a doubt, stupid beasts – simply because we let ourselves be harnessed.

Chapter 25 - The Blue Sky Wept

When our *echalon* with its *etap* had set out from Starobelsk, the Ukraine was a delight to experience. The fields, warmed by the spring sun, had already been ploughed and sowed. The first green shoots of plants, flowers and shrubs glimmered in the sun as they displayed their wondrous beauty.

In the orchards, colourful blossoms of fruit trees waved gently in the breeze. The lilacs and acacias spread their marvellous fragrance, filling every empty space. These delicious smells had reached us as they wafted in through the barred windows of our prison walls.

The strains of a harmonica playing Ukrainian love songs, such as *Hai ukhniem*, also penetrated the jail. The songs of male and female peasants combined with the trills of the birds, as they fluttered around the blossoming trees and chirped their thanks to the Almighty for allowing them to soar freely over the width and the breadth of the earth.

That was the Ukraine. But the farther we got from the Ukraine, and the closer we got to *Matushka-Rossiya*, 'Mother Russia,' the darker and colder it got.

Each revolution of the train wheels took us farther and farther from home, farther and farther from spring, and pulled us deeper and deeper into winter.

On this trip they fed us exactly the same fare as on our first *etap* from Stanislav to Starobelsk. But since this *etap* would last longer, they increased our ration a bit. They gave us an extra ten *deka* of cooked *kasha*, boiled cereal, per day.

The NKVD were aware of the difficult journey we had ahead of us, and what awaited us when – and if – we survived. They knew full well that if they didn't take care of us just a little better, then we would arrive at the camps more dead than alive, and wouldn't be in any condition to do the slave labour they needed us for.

One thing did not change: the lack of water to drink. (As for washing our hands – that was something we could only dream of!) The thirst was just as great now as it had been during the first *etap*. We would bang on the doors and plead for some water whenever the *echalon* stopped at a station, to no avail.

In the morning, hunger would overtake us, and we would devour our tiny portion of dry bread and salted herring, as if it were a delicacy. By the time we finished eating, thirst would plague us much more than hunger had.

The main watchmen of the *etap* would come in each night with big lanterns and count us to ensure that nobody had run away. Then they would knock around the boxcars with big wooden hammers on all sides to make sure the train cars were in good condition. They wanted to check especially for broken planks, or boards that might have been deliberately loosened by prisoners planning to escape. This occurred day in and day out, just like the first *etap*.

We traveled farther and farther north. We passed Gorky, and then Kirov. Until Kirov, we had noticed concentration camps every so often. The farther we got from

Kirov, and the more we approached Kotlas, the more camps there were. We observed more and more barracks surrounded by double rows of barbed wire and two *vyshkas*, watchtowers, at the corner of the barbed wire fences.

A feeling of pity overcame us when we saw prisoners in rags and tatters, trudging along to work. We shuddered as we saw two armed soldiers accompanying these poor slaves to their drudgery.

Thus, from time to time as we traveled, we got to witness what we would look like before long.

We could also see how the women prisoners looked. Just like the men, they were followed by armed soldiers. They, too, were dressed in men's clothes – long thick padded cotton trousers, and their footwear, made from thick cotton, were like the men's as well.

We might not have even recognized that these were women, since their hair was shorn, and we could scarcely see properly through the small dark windows of the train cars. But we heard their voices, and recognized that they belonged to the fair sex.

If some of us had thought that women would have it a little easier in the Soviet camps than men, we quickly became disabused of that notion.

I sadly pictured my beautiful *B* in the drab uniform I had just seen on those poor women.

It was then that I realized something else: In the Soviet Union, men and women had equal rights. Both were treated the same. I had never before had the opportunity to fully understand to what extent both sexes were truly equal.

Once our *echalon* left Kotlas, we passed only camps and more camps. It was as if the sky and the earth were covered with camps. If there was a civilian house somewhere, it probably belonged to a *nachalnik* of a camp. If there was an occasional civilian village somewhere, it was certainly inhabited by former prisoners or people who were ordered to live there.

At one of the stations, a prisoner saw his wife. He called out her name, "Marta, Martshiushka!" As soon as the poor woman saw her husband behind the little barred window, she began to wail. The guards noticed her and tried to chase her away, but the unfortunate woman wouldn't budge. She started to pour out the bitterness of her heart, and curse the Soviet regime. Two of the guards promptly grabbed her arms and dragged her away.

A few minutes later, the guards came back to the *echalon*. They were laughing. They had most likely 'taken care' of their victim. In all probability they had handed the women over to a militiaman, who knew how to get rid of her.

Although we had had many opportunities to imagine the kind of destiny that soon awaited us, we just wanted to get out of the train already. The endless traveling was very wearying. We were fed up with the constant rocking and shaking as we sat on the hard boards of the barred boxcars. We were sick of listening to the banging of the wooden hammers, which the NKVD used so often, to ensure that the boxcars were solid all around. Here, in the train cars, we were as helpless as babies. Everything had to be given to us. We couldn't even drink a plain little sip of water when we wanted.

Some of the prisoners became seriously ill on the journey. The extra ten *deka* of cooked *kasha* didn't seem to help them at all. Most of them came down with *ponos,* dysentery. The guards separated the ailing prisoners into another boxcar, so that the healthy ones wouldn't get stricken with the terrible disease that killed off most of the inmates of the Soviet jails. Thus, if sick prisoners were to pass away, they would not die among the healthy ones.

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After three weeks on the road, we stopped. It was May 15, 1941. We had finally arrived in the Siberian penal colony of Pechora. Here they would assign us to a labour camp.

When the train stopped, I was half awake and half asleep. Before they took us off the boxcars, I gazed through the barred windows, and beheld a dimly lit, barren, ash-grey horizon. What I saw was very puzzling. I had gone to sleep not long before, and according to my calculations, it should have been the middle of the night; it couldn't have been much later than midnight or one o'clock. There was no way it could have been morning, since I had only slept for a short while. How, then, could it be light outside? Were my eyes deceiving me? Was this a mirage or only a dream? For a while I even thought that my nerves must have been damaged since my incarceration, and I was simply imagining things.

No, this was not a dream. The sun had already started to rise. I had never in my life seen the sun so low. Could it have fallen to the horizon in this wasteland? Should the night be so short? Maybe... Who knew anything anymore?

It didn't take me long to learn that in Pechora, during the summer, there is virtually no nightfall, and in the winter there is hardly any daylight. Pechora is in a polar region, an arctic zone not far from the North Pole.

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We finally got out of the boxcars. Once I stretched my bones, stiff from the trip, I looked at the Pechora horizon. I gazed around to see if women were also getting out of the train. I was particularly interested in trying to catch a glimpse of *B* and asking her how she felt.

In the meantime, all I saw was a barren and empty expanse. No women and no *B*! Where was *B*?!

"Where is she? Where is she?!" I asked myself over and over.

I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs, for my voice to be heard throughout all of the Pechora woods, with its trees and polar bears. But my throat was all choked up, and no sound could come out. The storm rising within me didn't burst forth; instead, it exploded inside me. Indeed, it was as if all my strength had been drained. Never in my life had I felt so helpless and so weak.

It was then that I realized that I would have to give *B* up for lost and put her out of my mind. We would probably never see each other again. My grand illusions and high hopes would forever be just a distant fantasy. Now my dreams had come to an end. What value could my life have without her?

The blue Pechora sky wept, as a small, steady drizzle fell on the newly arrived prisoners. The entire area was dim and hazy, covered in white snow, as if it were the dead of winter.

Once we had disembarked, the first thing we did was run and grab some snow, and shove it into our mouths. We gobbled it down as if it were ice cream. With the snow, we tried to still the terrible hunger and thirst that had plagued us during the long weeks of our journey.

It wasn't long before we were pulled away from this somewhat pleasant diversion. Armed soldiers pushed us and ordered us to start moving. With heavy steps we shlepped our weary bodies to the Pechora River – thirteen kilometres away. Our swollen feet could barely carry us, as we wearily dragged one foot in front of the other.

If a bundle is the symbol of poverty, then we were very poor indeed. We all carried little bundles on our shoulders containing the meagre remnants of our worldly goods. We probably looked like a group of beggars getting ready to wander perpetually in exile. But even beggars occasionally have a piece of dry bread and an onion in their bundles. All we had was a few torn, worthless, charred rags. We transferred our little sacks from one shoulder to the other, and felt our strength ebbing away with every step.

As we approached the Pechora River, we noticed that it was still frozen, like a huge slab of snow-covered ice about to melt.

The prisoners of the night shift, divided into labour brigades, were working non-stop. They were in the process of building a long bridge that would span the Pechora River from one bank to the other. In the summer the river was impassable, except by

boat. In the winter this wasn't a problem, since the ice was so thick that the river could be crossed as if it were dry land. Once the bridge was built, even a train would be able to cross the Pechora River at any time of the year.

Our long march brought us to the *peresylka*, the place where they assigned prisoners to different sections of the *Pechorlag*, the Pechora camp. There were thousands of prisoners in the *peresylka*, shouting and clamouring. It felt to us, the new arrivals, as if we were in a melting pot, lost amidst a multitude of foreign creatures. We simply didn't know what kind of world we were in, and who was who. But one breed of convict felt right at home here – the *zhuliks,* the hardened criminals. The *zhuliks* were the top dogs here in the camp; they had the upper hand over everything and everyone. They were as comfortable here as if they were resting in their fathers' vineyards back home.

The penal colony consisted only of *palatkas*, barracks. Each barrack was packed full of people. We hardly had any room to move, but the *zhuliks* couldn't care less. They staked out a large section for themselves and played cards comfortably. It was forbidden to enter their area. If one so much as approached their part of the *palatka*, he would get hit on the head. One member of the gang always kept a piece of wood in his hand, and he wasn't averse to using it.

The whole project of populating such a desolate area like Pechora was a Soviet innovation. In the time of the Tsars, it was uninhabited. There was a story circulating among the prisoners that Tsar Nicolai II had said, "Pechora would be too severe a punishment even for the worst criminal!" Once in a while, some kind of expedition

would make its way to Pechora, but this happened very infrequently. Even adventurous travelers avoided this region.

The Soviet government had managed to recruit enough prisoners to occupy even such a wasteland. Now Pechora was a populated area. Tens of thousands of prisoners slaved here. They were put to work predominantly to build train tracks so that the Soviet Union would have a line to Vorkuta, some hundred kilometres to the north. Vorkuta is a region with a very unpleasant climate, with hurricanes and severe frost all year round. It was said of Vorkuta that winter lasts 'thirty months' a year there. But it is a region very rich in minerals, primarily coal.

Free people would never voluntarily come to this wild northern wasteland. The Soviet regime couldn't care less about the desires of the multitudes they arrested, whether they were guilty or not of their crimes. Each of us dreamed of tasting freedom, and being among our own people again, just once more in our lifetime. Each poor, wretched prisoner tried to stay alive, so he slaved away, day and night, in order to earn a few extra grams of bread. Thus, might he be able to sustain his miserable life.

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I was very eager to mingle among the new group of prisoners, in the hope of finding somebody I knew. I had been thrown into this melting pot together with so many people, yet I couldn't see any of my acquaintances. I ran from one barrack to another, and tried to look in, but the crowd was so great that I was unable to see a familiar face. It was as if I had been thrust out of the Tower of Babel. I heard a mixture of various European and Asiatic languages – languages that were entirely foreign to me. People were beating

each other up and swearing in the genuine Russian manner with the worst possible curses and obscenities.

Anarchy reigned in this place. People grabbed whatever they could whenever they could. Lawlessness was the order of the day. The main articles in demand were bread, tobacco and clothing. We would constantly hear the sweet dulcet tones of the encyclopedia of obscenities, which would be impossible for me to describe. There is no way that any language other than Russian can compete in this area. Curses could be heard continuously, wherever I happened to be.

Two *zhuliks*, a couple of disreputable guys, had hatched some sort of plan together. Ostensibly bickering and beating each other up, they struggled until one overpowered the other, and fell on top of him. In the midst of all the fighting and wrangling, as they fell to the ground, they dragged a third person down with them. This third person was entirely innocent, but he had one major offence: he was respectably dressed. This guiltless well-dressed prisoner was a 'greenhorn,' just like me. Otherwise, he would have been clad in rags by now. When the greenhorn got up, and came to himself, he saw that he was quite badly injured, and to top it off, he was missing his overcoat. He also noticed that the little bit of money that he had had in his pocket had disappeared, along with the bundle containing all of his supplies. By then, the *zhuliks* had taken their leave. In short, the greenhorn realized that he had become a victim. This was only one of the *zhuliks'* many dirty pranks.

There were all kinds of criminals here: thieves, bandits, thugs, hooligans, counter-revolutionaries, spies, and people like me. I had no idea exactly to what category

I belonged. But when you're among such riffraff, it matters little to what breed you belong. I was a *criminal,* so I was one of them.

Here, if you asked someone why he was arrested, he wouldn't deny that he had committed a crime. On the contrary, the bigger the crime, the prouder he was of his accomplishment. Some were so proud of their offences, it was as if they had committed great acts of heroism.

If a convict could proclaim that he was a thief and had been charged with robbery, he felt very privileged. When asked about his crime, he would boast, "I have the 162nd paragraph!" I could tell from his tone of voice that he was delighted with his bravery, and that we should all be thrilled to be in his company.

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"Why are you here?" other inmates would often ask me. That was a question most prisoners asked each other the first time they met.

"I… I..." It was very difficult for me to answer this simple question. "I have paragraph 80," I would stammer.

Article 80, or, as the inmates referred to it, 'paragraph' 80, was the charge for illegally crossing the Russian border. This article was not very popular among Soviet prisoners. Here, the most popular article was 'counter-revolution,' and most of the inmates were charged with it. All former suspects of Trotskyism, and all those who had inadvertently uttered word or a joke that contained a hint of antipathy towards the Soviet regime, got the 58th paragraph. I tried as much as possible to avoid giving an answer as to why I had been arrested. I would only state the paragraph number, which was unfamiliar

to most of the other prisoners. In truth, I felt ashamed of my paragraph. I tried to get out of answering any questions about why I was charged. Let the person I was talking to think that I was imprisoned for theft, murder, hooliganism, espionage or counter revolutionary activities, – but let him not know my true crime.

Yes, I had made peace with the thought that I had indeed committed a criminal act. For a long time now, I had stopped thinking that I didn't deserve a prison sentence for my deeds. Many times I believed that my sin was worthy of punishment.

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They took us to the bathhouse. It had been several weeks since we had washed ourselves, and we were absolutely filthy. The last time we had bathed was in Starobelsk. Since then, we had rubbed our hands in a little snow, if that could be called washing. Our clothes were crawling with lice, so they were taken to be disinfected. When we got our things back, they were half burned, and some were missing altogether. The workers in the *prizharka* most likely took the better things for themselves.

There wasn't too much time to do extensive research as to the mysterious disappearance of our clothing. They pushed us to get ready fast, because there was another group at the door waiting to take a bath. If someone hesitated too much or opened his mouth to mention that he was missing a better piece of clothing, he would get such a violent punch between the eyes that he would see stars. Besides, there was an official who held a list in his hand, and called our names with a booming voice, which echoed throughout the entire bathhouse, as if he were using a loudspeaker. We were

forced to collect our things quickly, and prodded to find the group to which we were assigned. We were thrown out of the hot bathhouse, all wet and sweaty.

I didn't know what day it was. There was no watch in the camp, and nobody knew what time it was, so I simply didn't know whether it was day or night. Since it never got dark here, I didn't even know whether it was tomorrow or still today. In vain, I searched for a familiar face. I couldn't see anybody that I could speak to. I knew very little Russian, and I couldn't find any other Jews. I was lost among all the Russians, Poles and Asians.

They divided us into labour brigades, and gave us each a chunk of bread. Two full days had passed since we had received our last portion of bread. We knew better than to ask questions about which day this bread was for. We held to the prisoners' motto: "When you're given something, take it!" According to the Soviet prison *zakon*, rules and regulations, we were owed three days' bread. So if we didn't get our three-day portion, was there anything we could do about it?

My group was then combined with other groups, so that together we numbered around three- to four hundred men. We were handed over to a few convoys with rifles on their backs. They didn't use dogs as much here, because it was not so easy to escape from the NKVD's clutches in a place such as this. Before the convoy escorted us farther north, the main guard warned us:

"Know that now you are under the command of the convoys. For not obeying the convoy; for taking one step to the right or to the left, without the permission of the

convoy; for an attempt to escape, and so on – the convoy has the right to open fire without warning! *Poniatna? Understood?*"

"Poniatna! Poniatna!" some Russians answered, and this answer was enough for all the other groups.

Chapter 26 - Forward, Ever Forward

As we walked away from Pechora, the sun was shining. The sun blazed with a blinding brightness, yet it might as well have been hidden. It was as if you had placed a burning candle in an oven: it lights up the oven but doesn't heat it up. That's how the sun was here – like a wicked stepmother, who had sworn not to warm up the Pechora area.

Like the Jews that escaped from Egypt, who marched with 'their bundles of clothes upon their shoulders,' so too, did we march with our little bundles on our backs. The main difference, of course, was that the Hebrews were bound for freedom from Egyptian exile, whereas our exile in the Soviet Union was just beginning.

We marched for hours, without any rest. We were exhausted from trudging in the deep mud and snow. We would have been happy if we could have arrived somewhere already – anyplace where we could just rest and settle down in our own little corner.

In the meantime, it started to rain. At the beginning, it was only a small drizzle, but before long, this innocent shower turned into a blizzard, which brought deep snow, accompanied by a northern wind. We could hardly move, and could barely keep our eyes open to see our next step. We got hot and cold and soaked through and through. Our little bundles became heavier and heavier.

From the first minute that I had left home, I realized that it was a curse to have to drag along too many things when one is traveling a long distance. By the time we crossed the border from Yasinya, I had experienced the problem of being stuck with an excess of baggage. I recalled how Feivel Y had wanted to throw away his knapsack, to rid himself of his heavy burden.

Now, more than ever, I felt the curse of having too many belongings. You become a slave to your own rags, since you have to drag them along with you and besides, you have to worry constantly and watch over them so they won't get stolen.

I turned around, and it was as if Feivel Y had dropped from the sky! There he was, trudging along next to me. I had just thought about him now, and whom did I see – Feivel, in the flesh! Apparently, his group was in Pechora too, and had hooked on to the same command as mine. We had not noticed each other before in the big crowd. Now that it was impossible to walk in a straight line because of the snow and the mud, sometimes a person who was in front of another ended up behind him. That's how we accidentally ended up side by side. We were very happy to see each other.

"Feivel, is it you?" I asked incredulously, as I saw him carrying his bundle of miseries, his knapsack full of rags. He could hardly breathe.

Feivel Y was delighted to see me. Indeed, he was even happier to see me than I was to see him. I could read his thoughts. Now he had found somebody who would help him carry his knapsack.

"It's good that we're together," he said. I've been looking for a familiar face."

My load was much lighter than his, and we exchanged bundles. I let him carry mine for a while, and I took his heavy sack.

The snow stung our faces like needles, as the wind dug deeper into our skin. The northern storm revealed its raw strength. Everything around us was covered with a massive, white, wet snow.

We had suffered not long ago for many months behind thick jail walls, accustomed to fetid, damp air. Then we endured several weeks in dark, cold boxcars, tired and weak from hunger and inactivity. All of a sudden, we were thrust from one extreme to another. We were now being prodded endlessly, day and night, on muddy, snowy roads. We slipped and slid at every step and often fell. When our energy gave out, we crawled on all fours. I tell you, even cattle would not be able to move ahead in such deep mud and under such dreadful circumstances.

It was worst for those who could not keep up with this *etap*, and who stayed close to the convoy. Ah, woe to them! The convoys would prod them with their rifle butts to get them to hurry up and not lag behind. No matter how desperate their situation, they had to go on.

At that point in time, some of us thought that only someone stronger than iron would ever survive this ordeal!

What we wouldn't have given now for a plain little sip of warm water, for a little *kipyatok*!

Some *etapnicks* lost their strength and fell. They couldn't go any farther. Their feet just gave out on them. Nothing helped, not the convoys' pushing, or threatening, or

beating. These poor unfortunates lay down as if the mud were a soft bed and the snow a mattress upon which they would find eternal peace.

We never did see exactly what happened to them, because the soldiers chased us forward, ever forward. From time to time, we heard a rifle shot, and we figured that each shot had robbed a person of his life.

Once in a while we did stop for a few minutes, and rested, standing up. Some *etapnicks* sat down on the wet earth, since we were wet through and through, anyway. At that moment we again envied those prisoners who were already in a camp.

"At least they have their own place," we thought.

During the several months of our imprisonment, we had believed that there couldn't have been anything worse in the world than to be isolated behind thick jail walls. We had thought that incarceration was the worst form of arrested life. Some of us felt that *katorga*,[48] hard labour, would be easier to endure than imprisonment, because the *katorzhanin* at least had the opportunity to breathe enough fresh air.

Now, however, some of us were beginning to realize that to liken a jail with a *lager* would be like comparing a sanatorium with a torture chamber.

After trudging approximately two hundred kilometres over a period of three days, we finally, with great difficulty, managed to drag ourselves to a kind of *lager* near Abez. This was where the main command of the Pechora penal colony was situated.

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[48] *Katorga:* hard labour or penal servitude. From the Greek word for the forced labour of a slave chained to the oar of a galley.
Katorzhanin:. A person sentenced to *katorga* work.

They hardly gave us time to spend the night in a deserted, broken-down old barrack. It was obvious that it had not been used for a long time, even for prisoners. There was garbage and dirt in each corner. There wasn't even a barrel for us to use as an oven, as was customary in the regular barracks. The rain came in through the broken roof, and we all got wet. We couldn't stop shivering. When we got up in the morning, we couldn't get warmed up. After our breakfast, a bit of watery gruel, we were immediately divided into labour brigades, and were chased to work.

=♦=

When we arrived in the *lager*, we were first inspected to see if we were healthy. A dark-faced, arrogant paramedic did the inspection. We had to strip naked in front of this egotistical jerk. He pinched everybody in the buttocks the way an experienced merchant judges cattle on the market. If he identified someone as sick, that person did not have to go to work. I was declared healthy.

Already on our first day, they demanded a hundred percent *norma* – a hundred percent Soviet quota.

We worked at crushing oppressive labour, like the slaves in Egypt. We tried with all our might to fill the allotted norm. They had assigned us to forestry work, and we were expected to cut and chop down trees in the woods. After that, we had to load the wood on sleds and drag it several kilometres away.

Although it was the first day of our *lager* work, and we were not used to these kinds of tasks, we might possibly have filled the *norma*, if only they had given us decent tools.

The tools we were provided with were half-broken. Most of the time, the handles fell off the axes and the saws. Besides, the tools were dull. By the time we repaired and sharpened them, the day was half over. But they demanded the full hundred percent quota anyway.

Nobody on our brigade was able to fill the *norma* that day. It was absolutely beyond our capabilities. We got punished, and received only thirty *deka* of bread, without any other food. According to Soviet regulations, an *otkazchik*, a malingerer who refuses to work, gets thirty *deka* of bread. Thirty *deka* is a *shtrafnoi payok*, a punishment portion.

In the Soviet Union, whoever doesn't work, doesn't eat.

Chapter 27 - Child's Play

Every dark cloud has a silver lining. So it was with me. I had a little bit of luck despite my misfortune, in that I had arrived at the Pechora *lager* at the beginning of the summer, and not in the dead of winter. Little by little I made peace with the thought that I would have to adapt to the frigid northern weather. And I did, indeed, gradually get used to the cold of the Arctic tundra.

It didn't take long before I got very thin. The criminals now began to refer to me as a *dokhodiaga*.[49] A *dokhodiaga* is somebody who would like to eat as much as a healthy person, but who is very weak, and is therefore an object of ridicule. The other prisoners would sneer at the *dokhodiaga*, as if he were a foul, nasty creature. "He's healthy enough to eat, but too sick to work!" they would jeer.

The truth is that I wanted to work. I tried as hard as I could, but no matter how much effort I put forth, I couldn't succeed to fill the *norma*.

So, working more than my strength could bear, and getting only a *shtrafnoi payok*, a punishment portion, I got thinner and thinner every day, until I felt that it wouldn't be

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[49] *Dokhodiaga*: from the Russian for "to come close to." A *dokhodiaga* was coming close to death.

long before I would just waste away and die! I had already had the privilege for the short time that I was at the camp, to see what had happened to some *dokhodiagas.* They were too weak to get up, yet were forced to work; when they came back to the barracks, they lay down on their bunks and never got up again.

I saw those kinds of scenes before my eyes daily. Yes, I too, was a candidate for such a spectacle! And if it had to happen, I wanted it to happen sooner rather than later. Every minute was a waste. What was my life worth without any shred of hope?

I very much envied the *Stakhanovites,*[50] the record breakers, who got nine hundred grams of bread. Nine hundred grams! If I were able to get such a portion just once, I would be the happiest person in the world!

=♦=

"How long is your sentence?" a vigorous man from my brigade, by the name of Eliakhin Galgan, once asked me. Eliakhin was a *Stakhanovets*, and he regularly got nine hundred grams of bread a day. He wanted to know how much time a *dokhodiaga* like me had left to serve.

"I'm sentenced to three years," I answered dejectedly, as if to say that my three years might as well have been a hundred, for all the difference it would make to my life.

In fact, three years in a Soviet prison was one of the shortest sentences meted out. Such sentences were called *detskiy srok*, a child's punishment. Regardless of how 'childish' such a sentence appeared to a real Soviet criminal, three years of such torture

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[50] *Stakhanovets:* an efficient worker. Named after Stakanov, a Soviet miner who became a hero of the workers and the party, the forerunner of all super performers.

was an eternity for someone such as myself. Eliakhin was a convict for whom my sentence was mere child's play; yet he understood full well what it meant for *me* to be jailed for three years, so he taunted me.

"Ha, ha, ha!" Eliakhin couldn't stop laughing. "A *dokhodiaga* like you is sentenced for three years! Ha ha ha! It won't take a year," he snickered, "and you'll drop dead just like an old horse!"

I sensed the truth in Eliakhin Galgan's humour, and took his remarks to heart. He was right. How could I compare myself to him? He was truly a giant next to me. He was sentenced to ten years but he would survive them more easily. It's no big deal to stay alive if you can have nine hundred grams of bread a day!

=♦=

The administration of the *lager* deliberately separated the prisoners in Pechora from their acquaintances and friends. I knew nobody in the camp. There were some Polish Jews, but I was a stranger to them. Besides, they had already been there for quite a while, and weren't greenhorns like me. Some were even *Stakhanovites*. What did they care about me, a *dokhodiaga*? Anyways, I was considered a Romanian, and the Polish Jews had a very bad opinion of Romanian Jews.

I wanted desperately to have a friend. I had never been so lonely in my life. Where should I look for a friend if not among my brethren, the children of Israel? I wouldn't care about what country he came from, as long as he was a Jew.

I finally succeeded in making friends with a Polish Jew from Warsaw, by the name of Ber'l Lederman. Ber'l was a *dokhodiaga* just like me. He could hardly stand on

his feet. Just like me, he was on a *shtrafnoi payok*, a punishment portion. His Polish comrades had turned on him, as if he were a bum, although they all knew that at home in Warsaw, Ber'l Lederman was an upstanding citizen, a somebody.

Since we both shared the same miseries, we stuck together and shared what was in our hearts. Since when does a Jew have to concern himself about where another Jew comes from?

We helped each other as much as we could. Mainly, we gave each other moral support. In truth, that was the only thing we had to give each other. Neither of us had any connections with the kitchen staff, so we couldn't provide one another with an extra bowl of soup from time to time, like others could. So indeed, all we could give each other was encouragement. We consoled ourselves with the dream that there would come a time that we would be released from the heavy yoke of the damned Russians; that we would be free one day from our exile in Russia, and live afterwards in a new world; that we would think more highly of ourselves for having survived such indescribable miseries in this cursed land, filled with only jails and camps. We fed each other with a daily portion of illusions and delusions.

Most likely, the moral support that we gave each other was more helpful than material help.

A lot of the produce earmarked for the prisoners got stolen. First of all, there was a privileged group – those who were allotted a large portion – who got extra privileges and better food. That fact alone meant that the privileged class benefited on the backs of the average prisoner. But that wasn't all. The *nachalnik* always made a deal with the

kitchen staff and with the *kaptchiartchik,* the stock clerk, to have the choice products set aside for the *nachalnik*. So when the *pridurkas*,[51] the *lager* clerks, did likewise, the *nachalnik* overlooked their thievery. The regular prisoners' fare ended up being very meagre indeed. As it was, the food that was officially assigned for the inmates was hardly enough to start with, even before all this corruption and shady dealing.

Consequently, if someone had a good friend or knew somebody who had an arrangement with the cook, he was very happy. That person would get back some of the products that had been stolen. Of course that didn't apply to Lederman or me. We weren't lucky enough to benefit from any of these privileges.

Overall, Lederman had a very pessimistic outlook about our future. He had been in this *lager* for over a year now, and he wondered how he had managed to survive up to this point. His definition of camp life was as follows:

"We live exactly like pack animals. The NKVD leech out all our strength, just like wild animals suck blood from their prey; they make us toil and suffer, like the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. One fine day, when we're totally weakened, we'll just collapse and drop dead!"

According to Lederman's point of view, Eliakhin, the *Stakhanovets*, was right to have laughed at my three-year sentence.

If the oppressive yoke of the *proizvodstvo*, the outdoor slave work wasn't enough, we suffered as much when we got back to the camp in the evening. In truth, our portion of daily misery did not end after a hard day's work. We toiled in the forests, and chopped

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[51] *Pridurka* – slang term for stock clerk, probably a variation of *pridurok*, Russian for 'idiot.'

wood all day, and then carried it several kilometres back to the camp, yet there was always a shortage of wood in our barrack. The watchman would take away all the wood, and we ended up freezing at night on our hard bed planks, without a straw mattress, or even a blanket. We would lie on our bunks and shiver until we fell asleep, exhausted from our hard day's work.

From the time Lederman and I had become friends, we agreed that we would sleep together. We twisted and braided our bodies together at night to keep warm.

I didn't have access to a mirror, so I wasn't sure exactly what I looked like. But somehow, I had the feeling that Lederman's appearance must have been even worse than mine. He was so shrunken and dark, that he hardly looked human. His tall and stooped body seemed to consist only of legs. It seemed as if his legs had just been stuck on to his scrawny body to make him look taller.

=♦=

All the clothes that I had brought with me were either torn or charred from the *prizharka*. I didn't want to part with my few poor possessions, even if they were falling apart, since they were from home and thus dear to me. One look at my rags and tatters, which shared their exile with me, would remind me of their former life, when they were new and in their full glory. But my pitiful possessions were leaving me little by little. Whatever was not destroyed by the disinfections ended up getting stolen or seized by the *zhuliks*. The *zhuliks* terrorized us and took whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted.

The only thing I had left was my overcoat. I looked after it as if it were a precious jewel. It was an expensive wool coat that I had purchased back home with money that I

had saved. It had cost me plenty, and I'd suffered enough until I'd managed to gather together the amount I needed to pay for it. Now the coat was coming in very handy. I didn't have a blanket, so in the daytime it was a regular coat and at night – a cover! Indeed, what would I have done without it?

Now that I had a friend, Lederman, I shared half of my coat with him. My coat was like Herschel Ostropolier's[52] blanket:

Herschel Ostroplier, it is told, once spent the night in the home of a rich man. The mistress of the household gave him a very small blanket to cover himself with, and Herschel was cold. All night, he shouted in a loud voice, "Move up! Move down! Move here! Move there!"

When his hosts asked Herschel why he had been shouting so loudly the night before, he replied that the blanket was so small that if he covered the top part of himself, the bottom part of him was cold, and when he covered himself on the right side, he froze on the left. So he had to order the blanket to move to each cold spot in turn.

My coat wasn't sufficiently large to cover me, so how could it be big enough for two? Maybe somebody will be able to figure out an answer. If there was a miracle with our forefather Jacob, and many small stones could turn into one large stone, why couldn't a small coat stretch and become bigger? Alas, there were no such miracles destined for Lederman and me. In truth, if you want to do a favour for a friend, you reap the satisfaction of having done the good deed, and you don't worry about the consequences.

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[52] Herschel Ostropolier: a comic legendary Jewish figure. Stories about him often have a humorous yet sharp social message.

I always took the coat with me to work, even when it was warm outside, and I didn't need it. I was afraid to leave it in the barrack, for fear that the *zhuliks* would get their paws on it, and then I could kiss my dear coat goodbye. My coat took care of me at night, so I had to help keep it safe during the day.

It was difficult to keep an eye on the coat all the time. I had to concentrate on it during all my waking hours. I hovered over it like a mother over her infant child. I didn't even realize myself to what extent I had been a slave to a tattered piece of clothing, until one fine day, it got stolen. I knew who the thief was, but that knowledge helped me not one bit.

A *pridurka* from the bookkeeping office had an eye on my coat and wouldn't stop pestering me to sell it to him. This clerk promised that he would look after me and use his influence with the *brigadir*, the brigade commander to have me assigned to easier work; he promised to give me fifty rubles in cash. Besides that, he would give me produce – a whole loaf of bread and a *pachka* of tobacco. I knew very well that the *pridurka* wanted to cheat me out of the coat, and that I would get none of the luxuries that he had promised me. Even if I could have been sure that he would keep his promises, I would still have refused his offer, although I would have made very good use of all of these things. The coat was my last memory from home, and that, in and of itself, was a good enough reason for me not to allow myself to be tempted. How could I part with the only thing that bound me with my home, for something that was here today and gone tomorrow? Besides, I simply needed that coat for a blanket, so that I wouldn't freeze at

night. And now that I had somebody else, Lederman, who was also enjoying the warmth of the coat, I would be taking away his portion of comfort, too.

One day, soon afterwards, there was a general *proverka,* a comprehensive roll call, in the camp, and we were all chased out into the yard. It took hours for them to call each of us by name, until we were allowed to return to the *lager*. When such a *proverka* takes place, the NKVD were assisted by the *pridurkas*, the *lager* clerks. In the mad rush, where we were all suddenly driven out of the barracks, I forgot to take my coat along with me.

The clerk, to whom I did not freely want to give away my coat, used this opportunity to steal it from me. I ran to the *dezhurnyi* and protested. The *dezhurnyi* asked me if I had a suspicion regarding the identity of the thief, so I told him what I knew. Unfortunately for me, the *dezhurnyi* was the *pridurka's* good friend, and had also benefited from stolen products. Not only did he not help me get back my coat, he did me a 'favour' and squealed on me to the person I had suspected.

It ended up that I got beaten and was taught a lesson about snitching on a comrade. I had to defend myself by protesting that I hadn't known what I was talking about. I later found out that I had indeed known whereof I spoke, and that it was the same *pridurka* that I had suspected who had actually stolen the coat. I was left with bruises and cynicism, and he was left with the coat.

Thus did my last memento from home depart like smoke up the chimney! No more coat, no more cover at night.

In the beginning I mourned for my beloved garment. Lederman saw how I grieved and he, too, felt sad. But my mourning period did not last long.

From then on, when I went to work, my thoughts were no longer constantly on my coat. When I went to the yard, I didn't have to drag along my coat. When I went to the bathhouse, I didn't have to be afraid that my precious coat would get stolen. From then on, I suddenly felt like a free man. Now I began to realize how enslaved I had been to a mere garment. So what if I would be a little colder at night? Before, with the coat, didn't I freeze anyhow?

With the loss of my overcoat, it was as if I had lost all sentiment that linked me to my past. I almost forgot about everybody. I simply didn't have the opportunity to think about home anymore. All my senses were concentrated on one objective: how to ease my life in exile.

All day I suffered from hunger. I endured the pain of the *katorga*, and the beatings of the *brigadir*, if he suspected that I didn't put all my strength and energy into my work. In addition, I suffered from the *zhuliks* at work and in the barracks. I will write more later about the curse of the *zhuliks*. Suffice it to say that my life in exile was a living hell. And if that was not enough, I was constantly insulted and called a *zhid*. In anti-Semitic Hungary and Romania, I had never heard this curse word uttered as often as here. So how could I find time to be sentimental?

I forgot my former friends and acquaintances. I almost forgot my poor parents – even my mother who had predicted that I would be sent to Siberia.

However, somebody I could not forget was my beloved *B*. I would have stopped thinking about her also, if she had stayed at home and hadn't shared her fate with mine. But as it was, she, too, was somewhere in a penal colony; and whenever I thought about

her, my heart ached. I imagined what kind of misfortune she must be in, and I mourned her fate even more than my own.

When I thought about *B*, I knew I must not let myself die. She had left her home on my account, and I owed it to her to survive. Maybe we would even be together again one day. I had to continue my struggle, if only to make it up to her somehow. I had to live!

But how could I continue to exist, despite my best intentions, when I was regularly on a *shtrafnoi payok* because I couldn't fulfill the *norma*?

If someone had told me at the time that I would be able to endure eight years in Soviet camps and get out alive, I would have laughed in his face and declared that he was crazy!

=♦=

As long as they didn't bother me for not fulfilling my allotted quota, beyond putting me on a *shtrafnoi payok*, that was only half a problem. The real trouble started when they didn't let me back into the zone to sleep and eat my meal, and forced me to return to the *proizvodstvo* site, to do a second shift to complete the *norma*. This happened a few times, and it's not as simple as it sounds.

I had been assigned to a labour brigade that had to dig out turf from the ground in preparation for laying of railroad tracks.

The turf had to be dug very deep, all the way to rock bottom, because the gravel and stones, which acted as supports for railroad ties, could not be placed on soft spongy earth. The layer of moss, or turf, was very deep. Sometimes we had to dig down six or

seven metres. The tools that we had were not suitable for such thick moss. In addition, we also had to uproot tree stumps. To do this kind of work, you need good sharp axes, sharp saws, pickaxes, spades and shovels. Even the *Stakhanovites*, who were used to these arduous tasks, could not keep up, because they didn't always have the necessary tools. We were like the Jewish slaves in Egypt, who were not given straw to make bricks, yet had to fulfill their quota regardless.

The supply shed never contained enough of the appropriate tools necessary for the tasks we were required to perform. We didn't have proper implements, yet they demanded the *norma* anyhow. The moss was full of thick tree stumps with thick roots, and to tear out a piece was as difficult as extracting a tooth without instruments. The quota was huge, and I was lacking in strength.

Many *dokhodiagas,* like me, were never able to achieve the *norma.*

We had to walk eight kilometres to the *proizvodstvo* site, since that was the distance from our zone. By the time we got to our work site, we were already exhausted. It was extremely difficult to get there; we had to trudge through water and mud all the way.

I was working the night shift. In the summer, the mosquitoes and black flies reigned over the whole region. They sucked the last bit of blood from our faces. They bit and sucked with such wild ferocity that we had to scratch ourselves constantly. Our faces got all swollen from the scratching. Even a *nakomarnik*, a net over our faces didn't help. The mosquitoes and black flies found their way and did their job through the net and

under the net. These bugs knew only one thing: God created them to suck human blood, and they had to carry out this mission with a vengeance.

The worst thing was that we had to carry our tools with us, and since both hands were occupied, we couldn't scratch ourselves for one second. No one should be expected to work under such inhumane conditions.

Once the turf was removed, we were then required to carry it a certain distance away, as part of our *norma*. Little wonder, then, that so few of us managed to complete our quotas.

Several times, when I came back from work with my brigade, they wouldn't let a few of us into the zone.

Lederman and I, as well as some other *dokhodiagas* were ordered to stand aside. We had just come off the night shift, and we were now being assigned to the brigade that worked during the day. We would have to go back to the *proizvodstvo* site and complete our *norma*!

We had already walked eight kilometres each way – that meant sixteen kilometres both ways – and we would now have to tramp another eight kilometres there and eight kilometres back with the second work brigade. After that, the next day, we would be required to go with our own brigade, to the *proizvodstvo* site and back. The convoys and the brigades were changed, but we *dokhodiagas* would have to persevere on and on, back and forth. We would have to march this eight-kilometre trek until we fulfilled our allotted norm. Actually, it was a sixteen-kilometre trek, because as soon as we were

finished with one shift, they assigned us to another one, and we had to hike back to our worksite yet again.

If that wasn't bad enough, we had to do all this on only a *shtrafnoi payok*, three hundred grams of bread!

It would be easier if I had said only thirty *deka* of bread. But three hundred grams sounds like more, and I'm adopting the terminology that was officially used in Soviet bookkeeping.

I suspect that the Soviets used the term 'grams' instead of *deka*, because they wanted to create the impression that we got more than we actually did. Even a kilo was not called a 'kilo,' but 'a thousand grams'; a kilo and twenty *deka* was referred to as 'one thousand, two hundred grams,' and so on.

The Soviet leaders might have argued that even our forefather Jacob spread out the cattle that he had brought as a gift for his brother Esau, so that Esau would think that he was getting more than he truly received. But there was one big difference: Jacob's gift was indeed great. He only wanted it to look a little bigger. But the Soviets always wanted to give the impression, when it suited their purpose, that little is big and vice versa.

Chapter 28 - Farewell, Dear Friend

The day came when the Nazis attacked the Soviet Union. We saw the camp watchmen run around like poisoned rats. The younger guards were mobilized to the front, and only the older ones remained behind. We prisoners sensed that something extraordinary was about to happen, but we didn't know what.

It was no surprise to me that the prisoners hadn't been informed that Stalin's ally, Hitler, had suddenly decided to attack his bosom buddy. Many events had likely taken place in the world since I had left home, but I knew very little about any of them. Over a year had passed since the Soviets had occupied Bessarabia and Bukovina, and it was only today that a young man from Chernovitz, by the name of Sakher, had found out about it. Sakher was also a *perebezchik*. He had run away and crossed the Soviet border in the spring of 1940. If Sakher had had a little more patience, he would have been spared the unnecessary effort of running to his 'comrades.' Instead, his 'comrades' would have paid him a visit at his home, in Chernovitz. Sakher was so excited when he heard this news that he couldn't believe that I was telling him the truth.

So, since we were usually kept in the dark about world events, it came as quite a surprise that we were informed so soon after this momentous offensive. The *nachalnik* himself called us into the camp yard and addressed us.

"*Rebyata,* children," the *nachalnik* proclaimed, "I want to inform you that the enemy of all mankind, Hitler, has attacked us, and the German Fascist hordes have penetrated our Motherland. They are bombarding our cities and towns. They are destroying our work. They are raping our wives and daughters. They are sowing death and destruction wherever they lay their claws!

"Therefore, it is the sacred duty of each and every one of us to fight against our foe, with all the means at our disposal. We must resist the enemy with all our strength, to our last drop of blood, until we destroy him and chase him out of our homeland!"

The *nachalnik* described a tragic picture of how the enemy had penetrated deep into Soviet territory, and what a fatal catastrophe had befallen the Russian people. He informed us that he had come to the conclusion that the only way to express solidarity and co-operation with our comrades at the front was for us to work harder. We would have to double, triple and even quadruple the daily *normas*. That was the only way we could unite with our brave soldiers on the battlefields!

At the end the *nachalnik* didn't forget to remark, "From now on, I will not tolerate the work of Lederman, and others like him. Instead of exceeding their *norma*, they do their best to fall behind. Such people, I repeat, will not be tolerated. From this day forward, this is what will happen to anyone who does not fulfill his *norma*: not only will he get a *shtrafnoi payok*, but he will also be considered an *otkaz,* a malingerer. Refusal

to work is considered sabotage, and I am sure that you know what kind of punishment a saboteur gets in the Soviet Union!"

The *payok* got smaller. *Stakhanovites* got only seven hundred grams of bread, not the nine hundred they were accustomed to. In the past, Lederman and I would occasionally be given five hundred grams of bread, but now the most we ever got was four hundred – except of course, for the times we were on a *shtrafnoi payok,* and received three hundred grams.

We got used to the idea that we were sinful creatures. We were both *dokhodiagas*, so what could we do? Our destiny was to go through life perpetually hungry. There was certainly no way we would find truth and justice among the *brigadir*s or the *nachalniks*.

=♦=

There was a rumour in the *lager* that there would be a major amnesty, and that many prisoners would be freed and sent to the front lines. The *perebezchiks* were very anxious for this to happen; we looked forward to this prospect more than anyone. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if this came to pass!" we exclaimed. We would willingly have gone to the battlefields to fight the Nazis, and thus reclaim our dignity.

The Polish prisoners whispered among themselves that they would be first on the list to be given amnesty and would be freed from the *lager* before long. Their provisional premier in exile, General Sikorski, had convinced Roosevelt and Churchill, the leaders of America and England respectively, to negotiate a deal with the Soviets, whereby all

Polish citizens would be freed, and organized into a regular army unit to fight the German Fascists.

It wasn't long before their instincts were indeed proven right. Usually camp gossip was worthless, but this once, the rumours turned out to be true. The *lager* administration started looking after Polish citizens better. Poles began to receive more nutritious food and improved care. A special medical committee came to the camp, and each inmate was examined more thoroughly than ever before. The weak prisoners got extra attention, and were assigned to a special 'survival' brigade. None of members of this group had to work, and yet they each got the same portion as a *Stakhanovets*.

Somehow, because of the Poles, I, too, was assigned to such a brigade. I imagined that perhaps I would be released, just like them. What did I care about special privileges, as long as I could be freed!

I didn't end up being liberated, but it was still fortuitous for me that this medical committee came to the camp. Who knows how long I would have suffered otherwise. Their purpose was to examine the Poles, but at the same time they checked me out, too, and determined that I was too weak to work. These doctors were really experts in *dokhodiagas*. This was evidenced by the fact that they assigned us to a group where we received the same amount of food as the *Stakhanovites*, but we were not forced to work.

Of course, Lederman, a Pole, was assigned to this special 'survival' brigade, too. The knowledge that he would shortly be freed did him a lot of good. He became rejuvenated. When I looked at him, I saw a new man who would shortly have the opportunity to live freely among his friends, acquaintances, and family. He would

probably soon be sent to a sanatorium somewhere, where he would be cured. He would become a human being again.

Now I had no one to negotiate on my behalf. I would have to remain behind in this filthy, remote *lager,* hungry, abandoned and lonely, with only strangers near at hand. I would soon lose the only dear friend I had made, after so much effort, in this godforsaken place.

I have to admit, though, that although I was truly delighted that Lederman had won his freedom, I was somewhat envious of him, too. Why couldn't such good fortune happen to me? Why couldn't I be freed as well?

My friendship with Lederman lasted until our final minute together, until the moment he left the *lager* together with the other Polish citizens. We both wept as we said our final goodbyes.

The hour of freedom for the Poles came. They each got new clothes, and were put onto trucks so they wouldn't have to walk to the station. Nothing is too good when it comes to free citizens! With shining faces, we saw them wave goodbye, as they receded in the distance towards their new free lives. As I watched such a large number of prisoners being liberated, I wondered, "Will I ever experience the wonderful miracle of freedom again in my lifetime?"

Chapter 29 - Zhid!

The inevitable arrived: the long, severe Pechora winter began. The cold was unbearable, the food insufficient and the work extremely hard – crushing, oppressive labour, like the toil of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt.

"How will I be able to withstand all these miseries?" I wondered.

I hatched a plan: I would freeze my feet!

Quite a few prisoners did just that, and it paid off for them. They were either sent to a *bolnitsa*, infirmary, where they had a chance to recuperate; or they were given a few days off work and rested in the barracks.

If my feet got frozen, then the paramedic would have to discharge me from work for a while, and I would have a little peace.

I desperately needed to get away from the *proizvodstvo* site, if only for a short time. A few days earlier, I had almost got burned at work. This is what happened:

Usually the *brigadir* lit a fire on the field. He would sit all day near the flame and warm himself continually, but the workers weren't allowed to approach the fire. We were supposed to generate our own warmth by working hard!

Someone who had not fulfilled his norm couldn't even dream of coming close to the flame. There was only one group of prisoners allowed near the fire, regardless of whether they had fulfilled their *norma* or not – the *zhuliks*. But I wasn't fortunate enough to be a *zhulik*.

When the weather was terribly cold, the *brigadir* made an exception and let the workers warm up for a few minutes.

On the day in question, there was a group of prisoners taking a short break around a small fire. I tried to squeeze in, so that I could warm up my frigid body like all the others.

But I was not like the others!

They all knew that I was a Jew, and that fact alone was enough for the Russians to push me away from the fire.

"*Zhid*, get lost!" they taunted, as I tried to warm up.

The Russians ridiculed me constantly. They made fun of the way I spoke Russian; they laughed at how inexperienced I was in hard labour; they even jeered at me when I was cold.

One Russian guy decided to play a trick on me. He knew that he could do whatever he wanted to a Jew, with impunity.

This Russian sneaked up behind me and set fire to my *bushlat*, my prison coat. At first, I didn't realize that my clothes were on fire. By the time I felt the burning heat, it was too late! My cotton padded trousers were aflame, as were my stockings. And, to add

to my bad luck, there was a strong wind, which inflamed the blaze, and made my cotton rags burn all the more.

It was not an ordinary cold day. The temperature was minus forty degrees Celsius, with a raging wind! What could I do now?!

How could I get rid of my burning clothes, which were scorching my body mercilessly?

If my *bushlat* had had real buttons, perhaps I would have been able to unfasten them and throw off my fiery coat, together with the rest of my garments. But I didn't have any buttons. I was like a biblical holy man wearing a robe with a belt knotted around my waist, and I didn't have any strength in my frozen fingers to untie it.

Who knows what would have happened to me if the *brigadir* had not come to my aid. He noticed that I was on fire, and realized that if he didn't take drastic measures, my situation would be hopeless. He proceeded to peel off my flaming rags piece by piece.

Suddenly, I was totally naked in the freezing cold!

The *brigadir* berated me for having been so careless as to let a fire ignite my clothes. Yet, he must have felt sorry for me, as I shivered in the wind, so he took off his own *bushlat*, and let me wear it for a while.

This episode gave the Russians an extra good opportunity to make fun of the *zhid*, who had burned like a straw roof before their very eyes, and then remained stark naked on the open field in such a terrible frost!

I was lucky that the *lager* was not too far away from the *proizvodstvo* site. I barely made it back alive.

The next day, the *nachalnik* ordered me to submit to an interrogation as to how I could have burned all my clothes at work.

I had to sign a document, on the *nachalnik's* orders, admitting that because of negligence on my part, my clothes had burned. My clothes were then rated *kompromat* – lost due to carelessness.

Occasionally prisoners were paid a few paltry rubles for their hard labour. In a case such as mine, they would tabulate the worth of the damaged clothing and subtract its value, since the clothes were missing due to the prisoner's negligence.

If an item got stolen from someone, the *nachalnik* also wrote down that the convict was careless, because he had let himself be robbed.

I experienced the full impact of this policy when I was released from the Pechora penal colony, and was owed a few hundred rubles for my six years of slave labour.

=♦=

Another incident occurred while trying to warm myself at a fire.

Very often, prisoners from one *lager* were assigned to another one. This second camp could be anywhere from a short distance to dozens of kilometres away, and of course we had to travel there on foot.

On one occasion, I was with an *etap,* a group of prisoners that had to walk to another *proizvodstvo* site very far away. On our way, we spent the night in an open field. Usually when that happened, the prisoners would make a fire until they dried themselves off and were ready to walk farther. There would be about ten to twelve people warming themselves around each fire.

I tried to squeeze into a space around the fire. Everything was all right, as long as there was enough room. As soon as it started to get crowded, they noticed me, and gave me their customary gibe, "*Zhid*, get lost!"

If I didn't clear out right away, they would push me onto the ground. When I tried to move to a second group, the same thing happened there. Everybody knew that I was a Jew, so they could torment me non-stop.

I saw that I had no other choice than to make my own fire. I had no experience, but where there's a will, there's a way. I gathered some thin branches and took some bark from an evergreen tree, which ignites quickly and burns steadily. Then I lit two flames from another fire, and blew on them until I had a proper fire.

Soon some prisoners noticed that I had a good thing going, and they started to come over to my fire. Some brought their own pine tree branches, and others just came to warm up.

Everything was fine, as long as there was enough room, but when the circle around the fire became crowded, I was the scapegoat again. I argued that they had no right to chase me away from my own fire, to no avail.

=♦=

The first cold days of my camp life were the most terrible.

As I walked to work one day, my face got frostbitten. I didn't realize it; I only felt cold, and nothing else. A soldier from my brigade looked at me, and noticed that my face was as white as snow.

The soldier informed the main convoy of the brigade, who thereupon, stopped everyone, and directed their attention to me.

The Russians recommended that I rub my face with snow.

I couldn't understand how icy snow could heal a frozen face, but if they said so, maybe they knew what they were talking about.

I took my tarpaulin gloves off, and saw that my fingers were also white and frozen.

They told me that I would have to rub my fingers with snow immediately; otherwise they would freeze and have to be amputated.

I was confused; I didn't know what to do first. Should I rub my hands or my face?

I felt at that moment that I was a goner.

A healthy *Stakhanovets* from my brigade noticed my bewilderment. Some kind of pity awoke in him, and he helped me in my time of need.

He lay me down on the ground, and slapped my cheeks; then he took handfuls of snow, and continually rubbed my face and hands. He didn't leave me alone until the blood started to circulate in my frozen body, and until my face came back to life.

Afterwards, when the brigade marched to work, I heard one convoy say to another, "*Chyort poberi*! Shit! The devil take him! What's the point of keeping this *dokhodiaga* with us on the work site? If he gets frostbite, we'll be responsible for him! As soon as he gets to the work area, and the *brigadir* allocates the work for the brigade, one of us should take the *dokhodiaga* back. Let the paramedic can be stuck with him instead of us!"

"*Khorosho,* Good," the second soldier said in agreement.

I got really excited when I overheard this conversation.

"How wonderful it will be," I thought. "Soon I'll be in a warm barrack. I'll be able to relax, even if it's for only a day. I'll lie down on my bunk, as if I were in my father's vineyard, and after that, who cares... The whole world could go under. A little bit of peace will do me so much good!"

To this day, I am surprised that a Soviet convoy actually showed some compassion to a prisoner. It was one of the very rare occurrences of this kind in my life at Pechora.

As soon as the *brigadir* finished assigning work to the prisoners, and they were all concentrated in a restricted zone, a soldier said to me, "Come, let's go back to the camp."

As I walked with the soldier to the *lager*, I got warmed up. When we arrived at the watchtower, the *dezhurnyi* didn't notice anything special about me. He couldn't figure out what we were doing there.

"Why did you bring him back?" the *dezhurnyi* asked the soldier harshly.

The soldier tried to explain that I had almost got frozen on the way to work. But the *dezhurnyi* was suspicious, and remarked ironically "When he goes to work, he freezes, but when he comes back, he gets hot!"

The *dezhurnyi* was in no hurry to open the gate of the *lager* and let me into the zone.

"I have no authorization to admit anybody in the middle of the day," he said.

The soldier didn't want to take me back to the *proizvodstvo* site. "If he croaks," the convoy said to the watchman, "you'll be responsible for him."

"Wait here," the *lager* watchman said grimly, and went off.

A few moments later, the *dezhurnyi* came back with the *lekar*, a short, pompous paramedic. The *lekar* unceremoniously took my pulse, and said to himself "Normal temperature." Then he asked me sternly, "Why did you leave work?"

I tried to tell him, in my broken Russian, that I had got frostbite, and that I had rubbed my hands and face with snow.

"*Vot molodets*! Bully for you! Aren't you great!" he exclaimed sarcastically.

The paramedic pounded my back. His eyes started to shine, and his dark face glowed with excitement.

"*Vot molodets*!" he repeated. "You're just fine. You can go back to work right now."

"I take full responsibility for him," he proclaimed to the convoy and the *dezhurnyi.* "Nothing will happen to him. He can go back to work."

I guess I was just not destined to have my day of peace.

The paramedic was an inmate like everyone else, but he was in a privileged position. The camp administration had authorized him to declare who was sick and who was not.

If the *lekar* had not been a cruel man, and if he hadn't known that I was a Jew, he would most likely have let me stay in the camp, especially since the convoy had taken the trouble of escorting me back alone from the *proizvodstvo* site.

Usually, paramedics freed the lowlifes and the *zhuliks* from work, even if there was nothing wrong with them. There was a predetermined number of people who could be declared ill, so this *lekar*, and others like him, would often send genuinely sick people to work, and let healthy slobs benefit from the misery of the *dokhodiagas*.

=♦=

There were times when we worked digging canals, and when it rained, it was impossible to get anything accomplished. If we remarked that we were getting drenched, as we stood all day long in the rain, and couldn't produce anything anyway, the *nachalnik* would answer cold-bloodedly, "We don't need your work. What's important to us is that you suffer!"

How could I manage to find a way to lessen my suffering for just a few days?

I saw that I wouldn't be able to accomplish this on the straight and narrow. I had no other choice than to freeze my feet.

I devised a simple plan. I would take two pieces of cotton and soak them in water. After that I would bind these wet strips of cotton around the soles of my feet. Then I would stay at work the whole day, twelve hours, outside in the bitter cold, and by then my feet would surely be frostbitten.

That day the brigade went very far to the work site, about five or six kilometres. On my way, I didn't feel cold at all.

Quite the reverse – my feet felt warmer than usual!

The wet cotton had probably got hot under my soles from the long walk, so my feet got warmer than they would normally have. And here I was, hoping that my feet would freeze!

In the meantime, the irony of it all was that because I wanted my feet to freeze, they deliberately refused to do so. I did feel a sharp pain in my soles, but as for being able to get even one day off – forget it!

None of the horrible conditions seemed to have any effect on me. Nothing succeeded to finish me off – not hunger, nor fire, nor freezing water, and not even the bitter cold.

I felt as if I should pat myself on the back, and shout, "Bravo! *Vot molodets*!"

If, despite the aforementioned methods, I still managed to survive, it was a sign that I had already got accustomed to the *katorga* existence.

I didn't know how long I would be able to withstand all this misery, but I saw now that the Angel of Death would have a very tough time getting hold of me.

From that moment on, I made a non-aggression pact with myself. I decided to stop waging any hostile acts against myself.

If a misfortune would happen, so be it, but I would never again voluntarily attempt to cripple myself.

At that time, I felt that I would be a free man again one day, and live to recount my story.

If the chilling frost didn't want to take me, when I had deliberately attempted to surrender to my destructive urge, it was a sign that I was tough, and that I would have to

live. I would never again willingly let myself bow under the pressure of the existing circumstances.

I had to remain alive, if not for myself, then because of *B*. How many times I thought of her, and asked myself over and over again, "Would she be able to withstand such miseries?"

Chapter 30 - Angel of Mercy

From then on, I tried to take good care of my feet. But I once did a foolish thing that almost cost me my life. More about that later.

Life was so difficult in the *lager* that some prisoners went to extraordinary lengths to get out of doing hard labour. I saw with my own eyes how a Romanian by the name of Kuzin took an axe, placed his left hand on the railroad tracks, and chopped off all five fingers. For this, they added a few extra years to his term, but at least he was no longer in any condition to work hard for the Soviet Union.

Another prisoner took a strip of cotton, soaked it in very strong acid, mixed with salt, and wrapped it around his shinbone. The acid ate away a piece of flesh from his leg. The *lekar* didn't want to let him off work, and his foot had to be amputated. Afterwards, he had only one leg, and needed to walk with crutches.

I, too, was tempted many times to commit an equally reckless deed, even though I had made a non-aggression pact with myself. Had I let myself be drawn in by my destructive urge, that had such power among the prisoners, I would surely not be writing my memoirs now.

If a miracle hadn't occurred during the first winter I was imprisoned in the Pechora penal colony, I would certainly not have been able to withstand the rigors of camp life, and would have succumbed to the angry pressure of my suffering. My salvation came from a woman named Marusa.

In the *lager*, there were some female brigades, housed in separate barracks. Women and men rarely got together, except at work at the *proizvodstvo* site or occasionally in the jail yard, when there was a main head count. If a man was caught in the women's barracks, or a woman in the men's, they were put in isolation overnight.

The women's barracks were always watched by special guards, but no matter. Every night, the *dezhurnyi* caught a few men at the women's and a few women at the men's quarters. They would suffer later at night in *kartzer*, but that didn't scare anybody away. Some were even apprehended a second time.

The *dezhurnyis* didn't always punish everybody for this crime. The *zhuliks* were overlooked for the offence of breaking *lager* discipline. They were lowlifes and were allowed to do what others weren't. So male *zhuliks* visited the women's barracks and female *zhuliks* went to the men's barracks with impunity. Even the great and exalted *nachalnik* himself didn't want to get involved with the *zhuliks*, so he feigned ignorance and looked the other way.

The women were in no way attracted by *dokhodiagas* like me, and, likewise, we had no interest in them. For us, the women were simply prisoners, just like the men. If we tried to catch a glimpse of a woman, it was only to find a resemblance to our own

mother or sister, or beloved, whom we missed terribly. I, too, just glanced at women's faces so that I could pretend that I was gazing on my darling *B*.

Sexual desire was no more than an abstraction for us *dokhodiagas*. We were devoid of any carnal temptation. Indeed, in the *lager,* we were more attracted to a dry little piece of bread and some warm soup than a woman's naked body. Our passions and senses were focused mainly on filling our bellies, to the exclusion of all else.

When I glanced at some of the women and saw how pathetic they looked, all I felt was pity. I felt sorry for all the prisoners, but somehow I had greater compassion for the women. As I gazed at a woman, I would think, "Oh, this is probably what *B* looks like."

The average woman didn't have it any better than the men. There was a privileged class, comprised of *zhuliks*, and a lower class, made up of *dokhodiagas,* among the female prisoners, too. The women's work quota was exactly the same as the men's; they wore the same clothes, and some actually looked like men in their prison garb. For the most part, it was difficult to differentiate men from women from a distance. The 'gentle sex' here was more a turn of phrase than an actual fact.

The privileged female *zhuliks* certainly lived better than the *dokhodiagas*. If there were any sexual relations among the prisoners, it was unquestionably not among the *dokhodiagas*, but among the *zhuliks*.

Most of the *brigadir*s, men as well as women, were *zhuliks*. They refused to work, and since nobody wanted to get into a fight with them, they ended up being *brigadir*s and seeing to it that others should work.

Among the female *zhuliks*, there was a woman by the name of Marusa, who was doing time for theft.

Once in a while, male and female brigades would work together on a railroad line. We were laying down railroad ties and tracks to build a new line from Pechora through Abez, to Varkuta, farther north. A large part of our job was to unload the *vertushkas*, open freight cars, which were filled with the ballast and stones necessary to build the railroad.

Unloading a *vertushka* was one of the most difficult tasks. It had to be done quickly, in case another train came by. That train had to be able to continue without being held up by the prisoners working on the main line. Because this work was so important, we never had a set time when our workday would end. Sometimes the *vertushkas* were scheduled to arrive later on, so we had to wait until their arrival and then unload them immediately. We worked these extra hours on the same *payok*. And that was not all. On other occasions, we would come back to the camp after our long overtime shift, and hardly have time to lay our heads down on our hard bunks, when we would be awakened again and ordered, "Hurry up, the *vertushka* is waiting for you!"

One of the women's brigades was led by Marusa. My *brigadir* and Marusa, both privileged prisoners, were on friendly terms. *Brigadir*s had many advantages: not only did they get out of doing the hard work, they could also sit all day near the fire and keep warm. In addition, they got much better food than the average prisoner. Their main duty was distributing the work for their brigade every morning. Once in a while, they would

prod the prisoners to get their work done, but the rest of the time they would relax by the fire and warm up.

One day, I caught a terrible chill. I was shaking as if I had contracted malaria. I probably had a fever. I felt that unless I approached the fire, where the *brigadir*s and other lowlifes sat, I would just freeze to death. I wasn't dressed too warmly. I didn't have *valinki*, felt boots on my feet, because *valinki* were distributed only for high achievers. It was considered a waste to give *valinki* to *dokhodiagas*, who were not productive anyhow. *Dokhodiagas* were supplied only with cotton socks. After my *bushlat* was burned, I was given an old threadbare coat that had hardly any cotton padding in it, so no wonder I was often chilled. On very cold days I almost got frozen stiff. I knew full well that if I were to approach the fire, the *brigadir* would chase me away with his usual taunt, "*Zhid*, get lost!" Yet, on the day in question, I plucked up my courage and boldly advanced toward the fire. As it turned out, Marusa was sitting at that same fire near my *brigadir*, when he tried to chase me away.

"You piece of rotten *Zhid* shit," he jeered. "I'll whip your *Zhid* hide, but good! Everyone else is working, but you, you lazy, disgusting *Zhid,* you're the only one who doesn't want to work. No wonder you're frozen."

He cursed me with distinctly Russian insults and taunts, and at every second or third word, he accentuated the word, *Zhid*.

I didn't protest his use of the contemptuous word *Zhid*, only because I had heard it so often, I became immune to it. The Russians and Ukrainians used to insult not only Jews, but even Asians and other people they didn't like, with the epithet *Zhid*. I was

convinced that nothing I said would change anything anyhow, so even if I were to declare, *How is it possible for you to utter an insult that is against the Soviet constitution?* it would do me no good. On the contrary, if the Russians or the Ukrainians, or the Poles saw that it bothered me to be called a *Zhid*, they would derive greater pleasure and use the opportunity to hurt me more often. When it came to something like this, the anti-Semites in the *lager* were like dogs. If you show a dog that you are afraid of it and run away, it will bark and chase you. Show the anti-Semites that it upsets you to be called *Zhid*, and they will torment you and all the Jews in the camp even more. So I let the anti-Semites bark.

But now, for once, the word *Zhid* came in handy. Marusa stepped in and took my side. She didn't let the *brigadir* chase me away from the fire.

"Vanka," she said to him. "Don't you see that he's frozen? Let him warm up a little."

Then she turned to me, and with a friendliness that was I unaccustomed to hearing in the camp, she bid me, "Warm up."

I didn't know who to obey, my overseer or Marusa, but he wasn't contradicting her, so I stayed near the fire, and did indeed warm up properly. I knew that there were others who would also have liked to benefit from the warmth and that I shouldn't be greedy, since the *brigadir* would never let a second *dokhodiaga* approach the fire until I left. So I made a move to go to give another prisoner a chance to warm up.

Marusa noticed that I wanted to leave and she held me back. "Sit for a bit and warm up some more.," she ordered.

Marusa stared and stared, and didn't take her eyes off me.

"What's your name?" she asked with interest.

"Lyova," I replied, since that's what they called me in the *lager*.

I was flabbergasted to see Marusa clap her hands and call out ecstatically, "I knew it! I could have sworn that your name was Lyova!"

I had no inkling as to why Marusa was so friendly. What did she see in me to make her take my side? Anyway, I was thankful and didn't know how to express my gratitude.

She became interested in what kind of portion I was receiving. She figured out from the way I looked that I must be on a *shtrafnoi payok.* She assured me that she would use her connections with the cooks to get me an extra bowl of soup. She also promised to supply me with a piece of bread at every available opportunity.

Marusa was true to her word. She went out of her way to come and look me up in the barrack and give me some bread. The other prisoners thought that she was probably looking for a *zhulik.* What a disappointment it was for them when they saw who Marusa was really seeking out and dealing with! Everybody wondered why – myself included.

At first, I didn't make a big deal out of this. If I was given something, I took it.

Marusa had probably asked my *brigadir* to assign me to lighter work and to give me a good report, so that I would get a decent *payok.* For a little while, the *brigadir* was actually kind to me.

Little by little, I regained my strength. Every day I received an additional chunk of bread and some extra cooked food, on top of a regular *payok,* as if I had completed the

norma. Because of this extra nourishment, it turned out that I could, indeed, work better. And I often ended up fulfilling my quota after all.

Marusa continued to take an interest in me. Every time she saw me, she inquired if I was getting a normal *payok* of bread, and if the cooks were giving me extra food. I couldn't thank her enough.

"I'd like to embrace you, Marusa darling," I exclaimed, "and kiss you from the bottom of my heart for all the kindness you've shown me."

I knew that Marusa was on good terms with the *nachalnik*, the *pridurka* and the *brigadir*, which gave her protection. But what was her true purpose in helping me out? If she had really wanted to do a good deed, weren't there enough *dokhodiagas* in the camp with whom she could redeem herself?

I had to find out what she saw in me! Asking her might end up spoiling everything, since feelings of friendship are stronger than the mystery that surrounds them. Yet I had to plumb the depths of her heart, and discover the real motive behind her kindness. At an opportune moment, I said, "Marusatchka, don't be angry with me, but I have something to ask you."

Marusa seemed to guess what I was about to say. "Ask whatever you want."

"What's the real reason that you're interested in me?"

Marusa was dressed in plain camp garb, yet she looked different from the other women in the *lager*. Despite her simple clothes, her grace was eye-catching. It was enough to glance at her face, especially her eyes, and her slender figure, to sense that under her ordinary camp uniform, there existed a special individual, unlike all the others.

If Marusa had been clad in feminine apparel, and not in a cotton *bushlat* and felt trousers, it would surely have been evident, right off the bat, that she was a real knock-out. She had a round, gentle face, sky blue eyes and blonde hair. It wasn't so much her physiognomy that set her apart from the other Russian women, as her grace.

I had brought Marusa into a bit of a dilemma with my question. After a short pause, she answered with a sigh, "My father is a Jew."

This clarified the issue a bit. I felt that there must be something else that motivated her to help me out with such enthusiasm. Perhaps it was some innate sense of Jewishness that was evoked in her, when she heard with how much hatred the *brigadir* had cursed me – and with how much venom he had emphasized the word *Zhid*. But that was a commonplace occurrence here, and there were many other Jews in the camp who were similarly insulted and harassed. Why didn't she come to their aid as well? Why wasn't she interested in the Russian Jews – her own fellow citizens – instead of me?

A thought crept into me. *Could she have fallen in love with me?* I chuckled. *What a joke! What kind of normal girl would fall in love with a dokhodiaga*?

I couldn't rest until I found out more. Marusa finally confessed that she had had a lover at home who was also called Lyova. But that wasn't all. Her Lyova looked exactly like me!

Whatever the reason, Marusa was my guardian angel. I didn't feel any physical attraction towards her, only a platonic love. In my eyes, she was not a woman, but an angel. The only other woman who was an angel for me was *B*. And even *B* wouldn't

have interested me as a woman under these circumstances. *Dokhodiagas* have no sexual desires.

One day Marusa came to my barrack.

"Lyova," she said, looking at me with pity. "I have come to say goodbye. My brigade has been assigned to another camp, together with all the women's brigades."

If someone had knocked me on the head with a club, I wouldn't have felt any worse than I did now. Where would I ever find such a gentle creature in the *lager*, who would treat me with such compassion? Indeed, I never did meet an angel like Marusa again. I had come upon her by accident, and that coincidental meeting had enabled me to regain my strength. It had probably saved my life. To think that this all came about thanks to the *brigadir* who had cursed me and called me *Zhid*!

I embraced Marusa and kissed her goodbye. That was the only time in all of my years in the *lager* that I ever kissed a woman. I never saw Marusa or heard from her again. May she be blessed, wherever she is.

Chapter 31 - An Extra Bite

Once Marusa left the *lager*, everything went back to the way it had been. Actually, it was even worse than before. I had got used to eating an extra ration, and now I was back on a *shtrafnoi payok*. While Marusa was in the camp, my *brigadir* was under her influence. He had wanted to ingratiate himself to her, so he had succumbed to her wishes, and wrote a good *payok* for me. Now that she was gone, he taunted me non-stop. "*Abrasha, gde tvoya Sarochka*? Abraham, where's your Sarah?" he chanted in a Talmudic singsong inflection.

The *brigadir* injected so much insult and sarcasm into these plain words, that he must have been consumed by much bitterness. I suspected that although he missed Marusa, or perhaps because he pined for her, he derived a great deal of pleasure in needling me. Sarcastic expressions like that, devoid of actual meaning, were often uttered by anti-Semites in the *lager*.

I was so hungry, now that I was back on a *shtrafnoi payok,* that I was willing to do any kind of work for an extra piece of bread. I noticed that sometimes prisoners would volunteer to chop wood for the officer's kitchen outside the zone, in exchange for some food. I thought that I might as well try my fortune, and chop wood too.

It was minus fifty degrees outside, and they didn't send the work brigades out. I didn't care about the freezing weather and bitter cold. I just had to get some extra nourishment!

This extra bite nearly cost me my life. Here is what happened:

There were three of us who volunteered to chop wood that day for the *okhre*, the officers: Shmuel Kagan, a well-known Jewish merchant from Kishinev, together with a Russian and myself. We chopped quite a large pile of wood for the officer's kitchen and for the guards. A soldier watched us from the *vyshka,* the camp watchtower.

Usually the woodcutters had to wait until the officers finished their supper, and then they were given some leftovers as payment for their labours.

We waited in the *tambur*, the anteroom leading to the kitchen. There were potato peels and cabbage leaves lying on the floor of the *tambur*. I had seen many prisoners make a whole meal out of potato peels and cabbage leaves. Washed and roasted, they were considered a real delicacy in the camp. I thought that I might as well do a good deed and bring some of these scraps back to my barracks mates so they could satisfy their hunger. It wouldn't cost me anything – those scraps were just going to be thrown out anyhow. I must have gazed very intently at this garbage, because an officer got suspicious, and asked, "What are you looking at?"

I replied that all I wanted was some potato peels and cabbage leaves.

The officer, it appeared, was not very impressed by my plea of innocence. He started to rummage among the trash, and to our astonishment, he found a whole piece of

pig meat there. In wartime, food was very expensive, even for the officials, to whom the Soviet administration gave many luxuries.

"How did this get here," the officer barked, pointing at the pig meat, "and where did you get it from?"

I was dumbfounded. I didn't know what to answer. The officer was so enraged, that any response would have made him even more suspicious. He proceeded into the kitchen and questioned the head cook for an explanation. The cook shifted all the blame onto the woodcutters. He asserted that we had likely stolen it from the kitchen while his back was turned.

There was no way we could have done it, since we had never set foot in the kitchen. Who would have let us in? But where theft was concerned, there was no logical reasoning.

The officer didn't stop badgering me. He insisted that I confess what I had planned to do with that side of meat. My denial of any wrongdoing didn't improve my situation. On the contrary, he became so agitated that he started to slap and punch me brutally. He wouldn't leave me alone. He just kept on hitting me over and over again. I was accustomed to receiving beatings for which I was innocent, but this time, the officer went too far. I lost my passivity, and became furious. I got almost as frenzied as the officer, and screamed at the top of my voice. I, a *dokhodiaga*, with my last reserves of strength, stood up to him and caught him with both my hands, to get him to stop beating me. He managed to loosen his hands from my grip and throw me onto the snowy ground. I didn't notice that he had withdrawn his pistol from his holster. As I fell, I couldn't see

what was going on around me. A second officer heard my shouts, grabbed the first officer by the hands and didn't let him shoot.

It's possible that I wouldn't have even known that the first officer had aimed his gun at me, if not for the other two woodcutters. They told me afterwards that they were convinced that I was doomed. A prisoner, guilty or not, was never allowed to resist an officer. Shmuel Kagan, the former merchant from Kishinev, suggested later, "You should go recite the blessing for those who have escaped great danger, and praise God that you're alive!"

My resistance had not gone unnoticed by the officer. He dragged me over to the camp, handed me over to the *dezhurnyi*, and ordered me into isolation for three days. Because of that incident, none of the woodcutters got any leftovers that evening. That meant that we had slaved and frozen all day for nothing. I guess we were just not destined to have an extra bite to eat.

I wasn't stuck in isolation for three days after all. Within half an hour, I was released. I had no idea at the time who could have pleaded on my behalf. It was only later on, that I figured out a probable explanation. I concluded that since the piece of meat had been among the potato peels, the cook must have been responsible. He had probably stolen the meat from the kitchen, and kept it for somebody in the *tambur*.

I never volunteered again after that, and only worked when I was ordered to. I came to the conclusion that if I ate a bit less, I wouldn't die of hunger, but extra labour could indeed kill me.

There was an expression in the camp, "From too much work, horses die."

=♦=

Winter started very early in Pechora. Indeed, there was almost no summer to speak of. True, there were a few warm days in July and August, but no more than that. Snow began to fall at the end of August, and by the middle of September, the snow was as high on the Siberian steppes as in Europe at the end of December. The temperature in October regularly hit thirty below. In November and December, there was some sunlight for only a few hours a day. It was as if the sun was ashamed to show her face, and made a reluctant appearance on the horizon for only a few minutes. She was neither warm nor bright – in fact, she looked like the moon in the middle of the day, and provided about as much warmth.

In Pechora, the summer nights are white, and the winter days are dark. Overall, in the Soviet Union, it was a topsy-turvy world: day is night, night is day! Whatever you need you don't have, whatever you have, you don't need. Chaos and disorder reigned.

It had now been over twelve months since I left home. What hadn't I experienced during this year? It was a blessing that there was no mirror in the camp; at least I didn't get to see how dreadful I must have looked. I imagined that I had probably become as different on the outside as I had on the inside. Surely, I would not have recognized my outward appearance, in the same way that I barely recognized my new thoughts and ideas. All my thinking had changed; all my conceptions I now perceived in a different light. Whether I liked it or not, I had become transformed into a criminal and a convict, who doesn't live, but merely exists.

The war was pressing ahead relentlessly. We found out that the Germans were advancing deeper and deeper into Russia. The *nachalnik* constantly exhorted us to work harder to defeat the enemy.

I imagined that there must have been great devastation in cities with large Jewish populations such as Chernovitz, Kishinev, Kiev, Kharkov and Odessa, but I never found out what was actually happening to the Jews in German-occupied regions. The Soviet propaganda concentrated on one point of view only – the Russian tragedy.

The *vospitatel*, camp propagandist, told us only about how the Russians suffered whenever the Germans occupied a city or a village. Sometimes, he would read the latest news bulletin from the front. He told us about partisan groups that were organized near the battlegrounds, and how these groups were fighting in the woods against the enemy. The *vospitatel* never said a word about the Jews; nor did he speak of Jewish partisan groups. I was to find out about the catastrophe that had befallen European Jewry only after I was freed from the *lager* in 1947.

So great was the misery in the camp that it was almost impossible to survive. Food became more and more scarce. Sometimes we were sent out to work for several days in a row, without bread. Like horses, we had to haul sleds piled high with wood from the forest. Actually, we had it even worse, since horses, at least, were provided with a portion of oats or barley every day, whereas we were given no nourishment at all. Why didn't we get bread? Because there was no flour left in the bakery.

"Why isn't there any flour in the bakery? When will we get some bread?" we grumbled. Nobody could answer those questions, although some prisoners said that the *nachalnik* had promised us a double portion the following day.

More often than not, it was not only one or two days, but three or four, that we had to do without bread, and we went to work hungry and faint from exhaustion. We would have been happy if they had supplied us with what they gave the horses – oats and barley. We had learned in the *lager* that bread could be made from barley – if only we had some barley!

These periods of hunger lasted quite a while, and were repeated again and again. The number of *dokhodiagas* increased. Prisoners who were too weak to work were nonetheless forced out of the zones. After a full day, they were unable to drag themselves back from the worksite, so they fell on top of the sleds, and we had to shlep them back together with our equipment. We could barely drag our own weary bodies, and we had to shlep *dokhodiagas* as well. People dropped like flies. Not without reason was there a saying in the *lager*, that under every railroad tie, there lies a corpse.

One time, when the hunger period had lasted for several days, we noticed an *izvozchik,* a wagoneer on our way back from work. He was from another camp, and was pulling a cart laden with bread from the bakery. We stormed the wagon and grabbed everything we could. Within minutes, all the bread was gone, down to the very last crumb. We attacked the freshly baked goods like ravenous animals devour their prey. The *izvoztchik* pleaded with us to have pity on him. He cried that he wouldn't be able to

show his face in the *lager*, where hundreds had gone hungry for so many days. But nothing he said had any effect – not even shots fired in the air from the convoys.

The *nachalniks* didn't show their faces at such a time. They left it to the *pridurkas*, the clerks, to explain to the hungry crowds why they should work without bread. They had a ready excuse, "We have to send food to the front first."

I went looking for older convicts, who had spent many years in the camps. I was curious to find out if they had experienced such miserable times in the past. I heard some terrible stories.

One of the old-timers that I befriended was a veteran convict named Djedja Kola. Djedja Kola was about fifty, but in truth, he looked more like a seventy-year old. Most prisoners couldn't survive the hardships of the camps, so there were few people in the *lager* older than him.

I had no idea why Djedja Kola was doing time. He couldn't tell me which specific offence he was in for: gangsterism, theft, forgery or something else, although he didn't deny that he had committed these crimes. Indeed, there weren't many crimes that he hadn't committed. He also wasn't sure how many times he'd been arrested. Djedja Kola never spoke without uttering a swear word, although I rarely saw him angry or upset. It's just that foul language was a camp custom, and curses added more emphasis to his words. That's how things were here.

For people like Djedja Kola, the *lager* was home. He scoffed at freedom. Even if he were to be freed, he had no family or friends, so where would he go? At least, here in the camp, everybody knew him and respected him; and he didn't have to work hard

because he was considered an invalid. He couldn't remember how long it had been since he had first been arrested – fifteen or twenty years, perhaps. What was the difference? He was comfortable here, so what did he need his freedom for?

Djedja Kola liked when somebody listened to his camp stories and experiences. He became cheerful and talkative.

"There were times in my camp life," he told me, furrowing his brow and shaking his head, "yeah, yeah, there were worse times than now. When I came to North Pechora in the early thirties, there were no barracks. We slept outside in the snow. Many people froze to death. Once the barracks were built, others, weaker than me, slept there. We healthier prisoners slept outside like dogs. But first of all, we had to build isolation cells and *kartzers*, for punishing those who disobeyed the rules. After that we got tarpaulin tents, so we had a roof over our heads. We would surround our tent with snow so that the wind wouldn't blow through."

He spoke with so much emotion that it was obvious to see he was reliving those past days.

"The hunger was terrible then, even worse than now," Djedja Kola told me, and his face got darker and darker. "Many times days went by before we saw a piece of bread. Once we killed a *dokhodiaga* and ate his flesh."

Djedja Kola didn't have a tooth left in his mouth. He had got *tsinga,* scurvy, a disease that afflicted all prisoners who were suffering from vitamin deficiency. Some side effects of *tsinga* included swelling and blistering all over the body, as well as rotting of the gums and teeth. Often prisoners didn't even feel any pain when their teeth fell out,

because the decaying process occurred gradually. By the time I met him, Djedja Kola chewed food with his gums the way others used their teeth. His gums had become as hard as bones.

After listening to Djedja Kola's stories, I almost thought that what we were living through now wasn't so bad...

Chapter 32 - Resistance Was Futile

By May, the long Pechora winter finally came to an end. According to the calendar, spring should have arrived long before, but even at that late date, there were snowstorms and freezing temperatures, just like in the dead of winter. More often than not, it would also rain, and the rain, mixed with the milder temperatures, would cause the huge mountains of snow to melt and create rivers of water where formerly there were footpaths. Then we had the dubious pleasure of trudging in ice-cold puddles and deep mud. The water, unlike the snow, soaked through our footwear, and we ended up having to spend entire days with our feet sopping wet.

Near the train tracks the snow was piled very high. We swept the snow from the railroad tracks all winter, so in some places the snow banks were as tall as a single-story building. The whole surrounding area consisted of sky and snow – sky, snow and camps. But at least the bone-chilling temperatures were over. It is true that, once in a while, blizzards and snowstorms still raged, but we didn't find that so terrible. We had seen much worse.

That spring, a review committee, called a 'commission' came to the camp. All prisoners had to undress and stand buck naked for inspection. We were each called by

name and told to step forward. We were then pinched in the buttocks, and the commissioners wrote down the results. What was written down, we were to discover a few days later. People were divided into categories according to their health. If someone was put into the first category, he was expected to work the full hundred percent quota. Those in the second category had to fulfill seventy percent of the norm. *Dokhodiagas* were assigned to the third category, and were required to do only fifty percent of the *norma*.

But all these categories were merely symbolic. When it came to work, our *brigadir* cared very little to which category we were assigned. "That's none of my concern," he would say. "Calculating everyone's percentage is the business of doctors and office clerks." Our *brigadir*s always demanded a minimum of one hundred percent *norma* from everyone, regardless of our ability to work.

I had good luck with the commission. It turned out that I didn't belong to any of the categories that had to work, and they sent me to the *bolnitsa*, infirmary instead. I heard one of the commissioners say, "Pellagra."

What does *pellagra* mean? In simple camp language it meant being as thin as a *dokhodiaga*. Someone officially diagnosed with pellagra got sent to the *bolnitsa*, and had the privilege of being given as much to eat as a healthy *Stakhanovets*. Surprisingly, Eliakhin, the huge *Stakhanovets*, was also in the infirmary. He was the one who had always got nine hundred grams of bread daily, and had laughed at my three-year sentence, predicting that I would die before the first year. It turned out Eliakhin, too, had pellagra.

Apparently, his daily portion of nine hundred grams of bread hadn't helped him much. Eliakhin got so thin he could hardly drag his huge feet.

Being sent to the *bolnitsa* was sometimes a stroke of luck for inmates in the camp. We felt somewhat freer there. We got food that was no worse than the regular camp fare, and, as an added bonus, we didn't have to work.

In the infirmary I had the best opportunity to observe how people fought with the Angel of Death. There was the occasional prisoner who stayed for an extended period of time with a chronic illness. But as a rule, nobody stayed too long. Either they got better – or they died... The very sick suffered mostly from *ponos,* dysentery. And if someone had pellagra, and got *ponos* as well, it was a known fact that he would soon have to pack his bags for the hereafter.

The infirmary was in a large tent, which contained approximately two hundred patients. There I made the acquaintance of a *perebezchik* from the Carpathian region, named Fischel Rubin. He gave me regards from people I had been in jail with. Fischel told me that in Camp Number Three, there were a lot of people from the Carpathian region – Hungarian and Romanian *perebezchiks*. He wondered why I hadn't been transported to Camp Three together with other *perebezchiks* like myself. He was sure that I would be sent to that camp once I was released from the hospital.

Fischel Rubin was not sick with pellagra. He was in the infirmary due to an unusual situation. A soldier had shot him as he was trying to break out of the camp.

It was said that Fischel Rubin had wanted to run away from the Pechora *lager*. In truth, he didn't really want to escape from the camp. Where could he have run to in the

middle of the winter, with no food and not a kopek to his name? And if he had, indeed, managed to accumulate all the necessary provisions, what would he have achieved? The NKVD would have caught him, anyway. Weren't there enough professional criminals, Russkies, who knew the whole area, and had tried unsuccessfully to run away? Hadn't they got caught anyway, since there was nothing around the area but camps and more camps? The only dwellings around the *lager* housed mostly NKVD agents and their families. Whenever a prisoner attempted to escape, all the adjacent camps were alerted, and virtually all escapees were eventually caught.

I myself had seen three dead bodies lying in the camp yard. Those three men had tried to escape, and NKVD agents had shot them and placed them there. They were put on display, so that everybody could see what they had accomplished. If prisoners had any intention of running away, they were warned that this was what they could expect.

Why on earth did Fischel Rubin have the urge to run away?

"You see," he confided in me, as if he were baring his soul to a dear friend. "I didn't want to run away from *here*. I wanted to run away from *myself*. I ran so that the soldiers would shoot me, and then I would be able to end this miserable camp existence..."

Did I understand Fischel? Of course! Hadn't I fantasized about doing the same thing? I had thought about it many times, but I didn't have Fischel's courage. Or maybe I did have the guts, but some inner power always held me back from doing something like that.

Fischel didn't get shot to death, but he remained disabled for the rest of his life. As I spoke to him, I got the feeling that he didn't care if he was a cripple, and that it was of no consequence to him that they would add a few years onto his sentence for his attempted escape. At least he now had the opportunity to rest in the infirmary. He had attempted to take his own life without much success, but I got the impression that he might try again.

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In the infirmary tent, the bed planks were laid out in double rows. As I was lying on my bunk, a patient beside me breathed his last. His body remained next to me for what seemed like an eternity. They handed out the bread, and I ate my portion of bread as usual; they gave out the cooked food, and I ate the cooked food, as if nothing had happened. And I wondered how I could be so indifferent to death. The body was finally taken away when the doctor came and certified that the patient was, indeed, dead. Loss of life was a very commonplace occurrence in the camp. One today, another tomorrow.

Eliakhin, the former *Stakhanovets*, got dysentery. He was in a critical state. It was obvious that he would soon die. I wanted to speak to him, but how? I paced back and forth around his bunk, in the hope that he would notice me. Ultimately, he did indeed become aware of my presence, and asked me to approach his bed.

"Lyova," he said weakly, each word laboured. "Lyova, take my piece of bread. I can't eat anyway..."

If a former *Stakhanovets* couldn't eat a little piece of bread, he must have been in very bad shape!

I was reluctant to take the bread from him, because I didn't want him to think that I was happy to see him in such a state.

"Here, take it, or else I'll give it to somebody else," he threatened.

He continued to insist until I couldn't resist the temptation any longer. I told him that I would give him the one-and-a-half *deka* of sugar that I received as an invalid, in exchange for his bread.

"Lyova," he whispered. "I want to give you a piece of advice. Never try to be a *Stakhanovets*. Everyone has to do some work, but for God's sake, don't work any more than you absolutely have to! Never run for an extra piece of bread, because you can pay for it with your life... Look at what happened to me... I forced myself to work as hard as possible, and ended up killing myself in the process. I squandered my last bit of strength so that I could stuff my face, and now my strength is leaving me...

"As long as I was healthy," Eliakhin said, "everybody made a big deal out of me. The *nachalnik* and the *brigadir*s pointed me out as a perfect example of how to work. I was the epitome of the good worker. Now that I'm sick, nobody even remembers that I exist..."

=♦=

Fischel Rubin was right. When I was released from the infirmary, they didn't send me back to my former camp, but to Camp Number Three, where most of the prisoners were *perebezchiks* and *zhuliks*. The *zhuliks* were a source of great misery to us. They knew that we were only second-class prisoners, so they could take advantage of us with impunity. We couldn't defend ourselves, and the camp administrators looked the other

way. Not only did the *zhuliks* rob us at every opportunity, they terrorized us as well. We were helpless, and they were very well-organized and cunning. It seemed as if wherever we went, there were a couple of *zhuliks* around to harass us.

The daily portion of bread was the only item they respected, and so they never grabbed it from our hands. But if we left a piece of bread lying around for a moment, it would disappear in a flash.

The *zhuliks* played cards amongst themselves. They would bet money, tobacco, or clothing, like a jacket or a pair of good pants. When one of them lost everything he owned, and he still wanted to continue playing, he would bet somebody else's belongings. And if he lost those too, he would then have to steal them. The *zhuliks* had only one rule when they lost: "Take whatever you want and from whomever you want, but pay up!" So when a *zhulik* lost at cards, usually a poor prisoner ended up paying his debts.

Sugar was distributed in the camp only once or twice a year. Each person went to the *kaptiarka*, storehouse, for his annual or biannual portion. I had been assigned five hundred grams, and that was supposed to last me for the next six months. I went to the *kaptiarka*, picked up my sugar, and signed a form stating that I had received my portion. As soon as I stepped out the door of the *kaptiarka,* a *zhulik* approached me and snarled, "Hand over your sugar!"

I tried to stand up to him. I had been looking forward to this for so long – it had been a year since I had received a whole pound of sugar. Sugar was the dearest thing I possessed, and now, it was to be taken from me just like that! I couldn't let it happen. My resistance was futile. The *zhulik* was stronger than me, and there was another one

hanging around to help him, if necessary. He stole my sugar and beat me up for putting up a fight.

I saw the first *zhulik* give my sugar to the second. They had played cards and bet on my portion of sugar; the one who had robbed me had lost.

The *zhulik* who had won must have had a bit of a guilty conscience, and he called me over. At first I didn't want to go, because I was afraid that he would also try to beat me up.

"Come over here, you stinking carcass!" he barked.

I was in no hurry to approach him.

"Come over here, I tell you!" he repeated in a slightly milder tone. He approached me and began to speak somewhat pleasantly, even though each sentence was peppered with the vulgar expression, *po-materi.*

"Listen to me, you idiot, and answer my questions! It's true that I didn't take anything from you, right? It's true that I'm not guilty of anything, right? It's true, right?"

Reluctantly, I had to agree. It was true that the other *zhulik* had done his dirty work.

"Here, you son of a bitch, take a hundred grams of sugar," he snarled. "I don't have to give you anything, but I'm giving you this because I want you to know what sugar tastes like."

Chapter 33 - Tsepeleshter's Brigade

In *Lager* Three, I met up with friends and acquaintances, among them an old friend, Dudi Goldstein, from my hometown, Sighet. He had crossed the border from Hungary to Russia together with *B* and Oscar.

There was a Jewish *brigadir* from Kalarash, Bessarabia, and most workers in his brigade were Jews. The *brigadir*'s name was Tsepeleshter, and his brigade was called *Brigada Tsepleshterava.*

In that camp, it felt homier, now that there were people with whom I could socialize with. For over a year, I had been with strangers, mostly Russians and Poles. When I did meet the occasional Russian Jew, he, too, was like a foreigner. The Russian camp Jews were so assimilated that they felt it wasn't in their best interest to be too friendly with a Jewish person.

I made the acquaintance of a Zionist leader from Bessarabia by the name of Haïm Schichman. He had actually been arrested because he was a Zionist. In 1940 when the Russians had marched into Bessarabia and Bukovina, they had immediately detained all undesirable elements, such as gendarmes, officers, stool pigeons, and – Zionist leaders. Haïm Schichman was among the first 'criminals' to be arrested.

Haïm hadn't had just any old job in Romania – he had been a high school physics and language professor. He was a man in his thirties, and despite having been incarcerated for two years, he had not lost his dignified posture. He had even managed to save his eyeglasses, which was no mean feat in a Soviet camp. It was, indeed, a wonder that he managed to keep both his self-respect and his spectacles. As a matter of fact, Haïm looked like a professor, even though he did manual labour. He spoke several languages besides Yiddish and Hebrew. I rarely met anyone in the camps as educated and refined as Haïm Schichman.

The conditions in *Lager* Number Three were similar to the other Soviet correctional institutions. The *norma* was the same, and the food was even worse than in my former camp. There were more *zhuliks,* and consequently a lot more theft. The *zhuliks* were not satisfied with having the luxury of being able to get out of work, and yet receive the same *payok* as a *Stakhanovets.* They still robbed products from the storehouse and the kitchen. Unfortunately, the impact of their thievery was felt most by the ordinary prisoners.

Tsepeleshter, the *brigadir*, was a wheeler-dealer. He bragged about having been a big wheel at home, and we could see that he was also a bigshot here in the camp. His brigade always managed to record excellent results. He had devised some sort of arrangement with the bookkeeping clerks, and got them to write inflated statistics for his brigade. Tsepeleshter boasted that he had not gone hungry for a single day since he arrived in the camp. As a *brigadir*, he could always have access to an extra bite of food without working too hard.

Dudi Goldstein and I were so delighted to see each other again, we embraced and kissed joyfully. Meeting up with someone from home, was quite an event here in the camp. When two Russians from the same city met one another, they would hug each other as if they were the best of friends, even if they were complete strangers. So meeting someone that one knew from home was like coming across a long lost relative. My joy was boundless, and, as for Dudi, he couldn't contain his excitement. Although he was the same age as me, he respected me as if I were an older comrade. He went to the kitchen and brought back food, to spare me a trip. He was so devoted that he even wanted to give me part of his *payok*. I didn't want to take advantage of Dudi's affection. Here we were equals, although at home he had merely been a member of the Zionist party, whereas I had been a leader.

Dudi was a *dokhodiaga* like me. He was small, gentle and thin. I had recognized him immediately, although his outward appearance was entirely different from the way I had remembered him. The only things that hadn't changed were the freckles on his face and the liveliness in his eyes. We were both assigned to Tsepeleshter's brigade. Despite our inability to complete our daily *norma* fully, Tsepeleshter wrote a complete hundred percent *payok* for us, just like all the other workers in the brigade. Tsepeleshter realized that we wanted to work, and that we put all our strength and energy towards fulfilling the *norma*, but we just couldn't do it. Tsepeleshter couldn't give us strength, but he could let us have a few extra percent.

=♦=

Dudi had different dreams every night, and he wanted me to analyze them. As a rule, everybody in the camp believed that dreams had great significance. A person who knew some hocus-pocus, and could read palms and interpret dreams was a lucky man. He could occasionally get a part of someone's portion, in exchange for a prediction about the future. Even the *nachalnik* was taken in by those charlatans. I didn't believe in all this nonsense, and laughed at Dudi. I told him that I didn't have the wisdom of our forefather Joseph, and couldn't interpret dreams. Dudi went over to a Romanian in our brigade, who analyzed everyone's dreams.

"I had a dream," Dudi told the Romanian, "that I got married. It was very dark, and I couldn't see who my bride was..."

"That means," the Romanian said, "that you will get a beating."

The Romanian was right. The next day he himself beat Dudi up. He whacked him silly, and thus correctly interpreted his dream!

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Shortly after I arrived in Camp Number Three, I received sad news about Herschel Pollack and Bernat Berkovics, the friends I had made at the beginning of my arrest. Although they had been very optimistic about their future in the Soviet Union, they had both broken down and died. Berkovics, who had come to Russia with his wife and child, was a heavy smoker; he would regularly trade his *payok* for tobacco. He became a *dokhodiaga*, and his thick body shrunk until it was no more than a sack of bones. Near the end, he probably knew that he was dying, because he didn't even eat his poor little portion of bread; most likely, he did it on purpose to be rid of his miseries faster. I was

told that he had constant fantasies about his wife and child, and then became so pessimistic that he lost all interest in life. He just couldn't take it any more. He got sick, but since he had no fever, he was forced to go out to work. One day he fainted and was taken to the hospital. It was too late, and within a few days, he passed away. His wife, Fanny, became a widow, although she was not aware of that for a long time.

Herschel Pollack, who had brought his sweetheart, Leah'ke with him to the Soviet Union, never forgave himself for having done so, and had a nervous breakdown. My friend Dudi Goldstein told me that Herschel used to run around the camp in the middle of the night as if he were in a trance, screaming frantically. During the day, he would sometimes remember his actions, and try to justify them.

"I knew that what I was doing wasn't right, it was just craziness. But I had to do it. I couldn't help myself."

Herschel, too, was taken away to the hospital, and died there.

I was greatly dismayed to learn of these sad tidings.

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There were many Jews in Tsepeleshter's brigade, so there was a greater desire to know when the High Holidays would fall. None of the Jews in the camp could remember how to do the calculation. With Haïm Schichman's help, I managed to use the method that the Polish Jew, Margolis, had taught me in the Starobelsk jail, and we actually figured out the exact date when Rosh Hashana would begin.

Once the Jewish prisoners found out that Rosh Hashana was approaching, everybody felt as if they were before Judgement Day. We all remembered our homes; we

reminisced about the holiness that always surrounded the days preceding the Days of Awe. Whether we were religious or not, we were all very emotional at this time of year. On Rosh Hashana we had to go to work as if it were any other day, but our hearts weren't in it. Nobody filled the *norma* that day. Tsepeleshter, the *brigadir*, didn't push us, as was his wont. He, too, didn't feel much like working; the record of his brigade went down to the lowest level on the two days of Rosh Hashana.

The brigade fared even worse on Yom Kippur. A few days after Rosh Hashana, Dudi Goldstein confided in me that he planned to stay in the barrack on Yom Kippur. "I won't go to work," he declared, "even if I knew that the whole world would turn upside down because of that!"

Dudi told me that he hoped he would be sent to isolation, so he could *daven* there and recite the prayers that he remembered. He wanted to make a spiritual self-reckoning. If he hadn't been aware that it was Yom Kippur, it wouldn't have mattered, but since he did know, he felt that he had to show solidarity with his loved ones at home.

Dudi used every trick he could think of to remain in the zone on Yom Kippur. He went to the paramedic and asked to be freed for that day; but he didn't have a fever, so he was declared fit to work. When the brigade went out to the *proizvodstvo* site, he hid under the bed planks. Afterwards, when the brigades were already at work, they did a head count. The *dezhurnyi* found out that Dudi had remained behind in the camp, and put him in isolation for a whole day and a whole night. Dudi almost froze to death. The snow was more than a metre high. It looked more like Chanukah than the High Holidays.

Tsepeleshter asked me to say *Yiskor*[53] with him. Although I had never lost a close relative, I knew that prayer by heart. When some Jews heard me reciting *Yiskor* with Tsepeleshter, they joined in on the snow-covered field, and a quorum of ten Jews repeated *Yiskor elohim es n'shomes...*

Our voices sounded melancholy. The wind whistled, and gave the impression that it, too, was praying for the dead souls, together with the mournful Jews. Tsepeleshter began to sob in the middle of *Maskir N'shomes*. When the Jews in the brigade saw that the *brigadir* himself was crying, everybody wept, myself included.

That day, the Jews in the brigade didn't work. The few Romanians who were with us understood what Yom Kippur meant for Jews. They left us alone, and did their work without us.

Thus our workplace in the wild Pechora wasteland was turned into a holy site, into a place where Jews poured out their hearts, praying to the Creator of the Universe; into a place where Jews regretted their sins, 'both known and unknown.'

The *Brigada Tsepleshterava* didn't last too long. The brigade got disbanded, most likely because Tsepeleshter was too lenient and didn't push his people to work much above their strength. The brigade sank lower and lower in its performance. No longer was it a record breaker. Tsepeleshter himself had to go to work on another brigade. He was not a youngster anymore – he was already in his forties. A prisoner of forty was considered old; most of the elderly inmates died off rather quickly. Tsepeleshter wasn't used to hard work, having been a *brigadir*, but they demanded a hundred percent *norma*

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[53] *Yiskor*: a prayer commemorating the dead, recited on religious holidays.

from him. He didn't have the strength to fill his allotted norm, and soon became a *dokhodiaga* like Dudi Goldstein and me. We were young, and had got used to our problems, but for Tsepeleshter the real miseries were just starting. He broke down one day and died in the hospital in August 1943.

Chapter 34 - Wheel of Fortune

The days turned into months and the months into years, and we never knew if there would ever be an end to our suffering. We were completely unaware of what was happening in the world. We didn't even know much about what was going on in the front. From time to time, the *vospitatel* would read us the news, and he would recite the heroic deeds of the Red Army as they fought for Stalin in Stalingrad. He would proclaim that the Red Army was defeating the Nazis at every turn, but we suspected that since the German army had managed to penetrate the Russian interior, it was probably a bitter struggle.

Even though we despised the Communist Soviet regime, which was founded on theft, terror, brutality and atrocities, most of us didn't want the Germans to win. A few prisoners were indifferent to the whole matter. This minority was so bitter against the Soviets that they didn't care if Russia lost the war. Many times did I hear some prisoners say, "We will never experience joy in our lives, so let the Russkies also be destroyed together with us!"

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Little by little, it got closer to the end of our three-year sentence. We *perebezchiks*, wanted very much for the Soviets to free us. We would regain our pride and self-esteem if we were sent to the front. All our differences with the Soviets would be forgotten, if only they gave us the opportunity to fight against the Fascist brutes. *If the Soviets are monsters*, we thought, *then the Nazis must be even more skilled monsters*. We preferred to support the lesser of the two evils — the Soviets rather than the Nazis. We would fight like lions, with the knowledge that we could express our solidarity with all the soldiers who were already putting their lives on the line for freedom.

Haïm Schichman warned us that we shouldn't get our hopes up. He was pretty convinced that no political prisoners with foreign status would be freed until after the war, even though they were only sentenced to three or five years.

"If only they would free us as soon as the war ends," Haïm sighed.

Haïm was right. Shortly after our term was finished, we were ordered to sign a document — called a *do okonchaniya voiny* — stating that we would not be freed before the end of the war.

Haïm Schichman's general knowledge came in handy, and he was named a paramedic. Every Jew in the camp, myself included, was happy about it, because now we could enjoy the benefits of taking a day's rest from work, once in a while.

We Jews gave Haïm plenty of problems. I was no exception, since I was often sick. He begged me to stop bothering him, because there were many *dokhodiagas* in the camp. But how could I leave him alone when time and again I felt that my strength was leaving me?

"If I were a paramedic and you were sick," I contended, "wouldn't I allow you the privilege of taking a day off? Just pretend I'm a *zhulik*. They take days off all the time."

Haïm didn't know what to do with me. He had no choice other than to send me to the hospital for consultation. It turned out that whenever I was sent to the hospital, I was, indeed, declared sick, and admitted. Not every paramedic wanted to refer me to the hospital. What did they care if I suffered? It was, indeed, lucky for me that Haïm Schichman became the camp paramedic, and that he often sent me for consultation. Even the doctors in the hospital didn't know what to do with me. They had to notify the hospital that I was a *dokhodiaga*, and as such I was entitled to be in the hospital. The chief doctor — the *nachalnik sanchasti* — got to know me well. After a while, every time he saw me he would say, "Since when have you *not* been in the hospital?"

The *nachalnik sanchasti* was a tall, skinny man from Gruzia, and like all Asians, his skin was brown. His words, spoken with an Asian accent, sounded charming to me, especially since he didn't object to my spending some time resting in the hospital once in a while.

In general, the doctors left me alone. They knew that I was the type of *dokhodiaga* that would survive if allowed some respite from time to time. But there was one doctor — a female Jewish prisoner at that — who was a real bitch. Every *dokhodiaga* was afraid of her. When she was on duty, you had to have one foot in the grave in order to be allowed to take a break in the hospital. She couldn't understand why I was there so often. "There are more *dokhodiagas* like you in camp, and they work!" she would scream at me, as if I owed her something.

When she kicked me out of the hospital, I had no choice but to return to the *lager*, and complain again to Haïm Schichman.

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Thus I went back and forth from the hospital to the camp, and from the camp to the hospital, until one time I found myself in the hospital, and it looked like I would never get out of there.

It started when I began to see black spots in front of my eyes. The black spots then turned into all kinds of unimaginable creatures. I shivered like a fish, and burned up like a straw roof. Worst of all, I couldn't eat. For the first time since my incarceration, I couldn't finish my daily *payok* of bread! That night, I had the most awful nightmares. I hallucinated and babbled all sorts of nonsense.

The next day, Haïm Schichman declared that this time I was really, truly sick. I had come down with typhus. I can barely remember what happened at the beginning of my illness. If I got better under such circumstances, and managed to survive, then it was truly a miracle. I had never been so close to death.

Now I wanted to live more than ever before. I acquired a newfound respect for life. Soon the war would end, with the defeat of the Germans. To live to see the day of the Nazis' downfall would be worth all my suffering! Maybe I would even be freed. Why should I die now, so soon before my salvation?

I was in the hospital for several months before I regained some of my strength. They sent me back to the camp, but I didn't last long there, and became sick again. My

wheel of fortune was spinning from the camp to the hospital and back, until one day I found out that the war had ended and the Germans had, indeed, been defeated.

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The Russians were ecstatic. In truth, everybody in the camp was pleased that the war was over and that the Germans were beaten, but the Russians were doubly happy. They were delighted because there would soon be an amnesty due to the Soviet victory over the Fascist hordes, and the Russians would be the first to benefit from the amnesty and be freed from the penal colony.

We *perebezchiks* had a feeling that even now, they would ignore us. We suspected that we would not benefit from the amnesty, although everybody originally sentenced to three years was supposed to be released first. We had signed a declaration stating that we would be liberated after the war. Now the war was over, and we had been imprisoned for over five years, instead of three. In theory, we should have been the first to be released!

Sure enough, instead of freeing us, we were forced to sign a new document, stating that our freedom was not confirmed, and that we were to be imprisoned for an undetermined length of time.

Again we had to watch as many were freed, but we *perebezchiks* were treated as the most sinful creatures in the whole world. There would have to be some extraordinary miracle for us to be freed one day.

Despite my physical and emotional pain, I did recover a bit. Once I looked better, I was sent again to do the *katorga* work. Whether I was imprisoned – with a sentence or

without a sentence – I was still a *lagernik*, a 'camper.' And if I was healthy, I was treated like a hardened criminal. To be in good health was also a crime. The *perebezchiks* didn't want to work harder now that the war was over. We didn't want to slog away as we had when we started our *katorga* work over five years earlier, but alas, we had no choice.

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Summer started. Just as the winter brought its own discomfort – the biting cold which could be felt here more than anywhere – so, too, did the summer spawn its misery that could be felt here more than anywhere in the world. I had managed to become accustomed to all the miseries in the *lager,* but there was one nuisance that I couldn't get used to: the mosquitoes and black flies. They bit my face, and it would get all swollen, much more than anyone else's. I am not exaggerating when I say that my face puffed up like a balloon. Whoever has not lived in an area where there are swarms of mosquitoes and black flies cannot understand what I am talking about.

One day, when my face was particularly swollen, I didn't want to go to work.

Haïm Schichman wasn't a paramedic anymore. He had been assigned to general work again.

"You see, Haïm," I joked with him at work, "You did make a contribution while you were a paramedic. If you hadn't recognized that I was sick, and if I had died, your conscience would be bothering you now. I'm still alive, so you have some portion of me."

"If you haven't died until now," Haïm replied smiling, pleased with my compliment, "you will live a long life!"

Now, instead of Haïm, there was a female paramedic in the penal colony who was not a prisoner, but a free Soviet citizen. She was a tall, blonde woman with a big mouth. Above all, she was a bitch. Since she had taken Haïm's place, the number of *dokhodiagas* in the camp increased. She didn't even want to have a look at me, although my face was all blown up.

"You're not the only one bitten by black flies!" she declared sarcastically.

It was true that there were many others who were stung. That argument was enough for the paramedic not to free me from work, even though nobody was as swollen as me.

I didn't want to go to the *proizvodstvo* site. I was more allergic than anybody else. They could put me in isolation, or punish me as much as they wanted, as long as they let me stay in the zone, where there weren't so many vicious bugs.

After many protests, the paramedic finally called me over to the laboratory, and took my temperature. The mercury on the thermometer didn't even move. She thought that the thermometer must be broken, so she used another one. The second thermometer also refused to register any temperature at all.

"You're a *pakostnik*, a sneaky trouble-maker!" the paramedic screamed. "You're not dead, and yet you have absolutely no temperature. Take him to the *kartzer*!" she ordered the camp commander in a rage.

If there happened to be a woman, Marusa, who had helped me in the camp, I had now come across another woman more evil than the devil himself.

The isolation chambers in the camps were situated near the watchmen. A very thin wooden wall separated the *kartzer* from the watchtower, so prisoners kept in isolation could hear the guards talking amongst themselves. On this occasion, I could hear exactly what the *nachalnik* of the camp said to the head doctor of the hospital, the *nachalnik sanchasti.*

"I have an unusual case," I heard the *nachalnik* shout into the phone. "A *pakostnik* has intentionally let himself be bitten more than anyone else, so his face is more swollen. But that's not all – he has a way of holding the thermometer so that it won't show any temperature. The paramedic doesn't want to free him from work, so in the meantime, he's in the *kartzer*. I'm afraid to keep him there, because he's one of the most well known *dokhodiagas* in the camp. I don't know how to handle this situation. What should I do with him?"

The hospital was quite a distance from the *lager*. As a rule, the *nachalnik sanchasti* only came to the camp as part of a commission to examine a large group, never for isolated cases. He must have been very curious about my case, because he came down from the hospital together with his assistant, to see only me.

The *nachalnik sanchasti* knew me very well already. He was the one who used to ask me, *Lyova, since when are you not in the hospital?* Now my face looked so strange, that he could barely recognize me. He took one look at me and asked the paramedic, "Why don't you free someone with such a face?"

They took my temperature again, and once more the thermometer was indifferent to my body temperature. The doctor prescribed some sort of medicine, and afterwards they put the thermometer in my mouth again. This time, the mercury went up a bit.

The *nachalnik sanchasti* ordered the paramedic to admit me to the infirmary for a few days and have cold compresses applied to my face until the swelling disappeared.

To this day, I cannot understand how it is possible for a person to register no temperature and still remain alive.

Chapter 35 - A Proper Yiddish Education

Now that the war was over, we thought that the conditions in the camp would be different, and that we would be able to work a little less. Not a chance! The *nachalniks* pushed us relentlessly – *Davai, davai, Hurry up, hurry up*!

During wartime, the Soviet propaganda in the *lager* had proclaimed that more work needed to be done to express solidarity with those fighting on the front, and to help defeat the Fascists. Now we had to work to express solidarity with the workers who were rebuilding what the enemy had destroyed during the war.

New arrivals came into the penal colony – mostly prisoners of war formerly detained by the Germans. Why they had to be arrested, I couldn't understand. Among the new detainees were former high-ranking officers; regrettably, I cannot remember their names. I spoke with some of the new arrivals, and inquired whether they had been sentenced in a courthouse, or if they had been jailed summarily, like so many others.

"There was a trial, if you can call it that," a former Ukrainian prisoner of war, named Yatlenke told me, "but it was more like a kangaroo court. The judge asked me why I had let myself be caught. I told him that the enemy had encircled my whole regiment, and I didn't even know that I was to become a war prisoner. The judge then

asked why I hadn't killed myself once I had realized that I was about to be arrested. I answered that there had been a general with me, and even he hadn't shot himself, so why should I – a simple soldier – take my own life?"

For such a smart-alecky reply, the judge sentenced him to ten years *katorga* labour.

There were many new arrivals who had indeed earned their sentences, especially Ukrainians and Poles, who had lived in Ukraine, and had served the enemy with devotion when the Germans had invaded their cities. Therefore, the judges sentenced most of them harshly. Guilty or innocent – it made no difference; it was enough for the Soviet judges to harbour a tiny suspicion that someone had been a collaborator. They were satisfied if there was one guilty fish among the ten that they netted.

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Among these newcomers, I met an interesting person, by the name of Alexei Tsitovitch. Alexei was an engineer by profession. He had been sentenced to ten years for having been a former German POW. He was an engineer, and as such, was given some privileges in the *lager*. Instead of working like an ordinary prisoner, doing general *katorga* labour, he was an overseer of certain projects that demanded engineering knowledge.

At the beginning, it was hard for me to tell whether Alexei was a Jew or a Russian. He was tall and broad-boned, like a true healthy Russian. As a matter of fact, his whole face and body looked Russian; but there was something Jewish about his eyes. How eyes can look Jewish, I cannot describe in words. I don't know myself why I can

sense a Jew more from his gaze than his nose. In any case, Alexei and I made friends, and as I had suspected, it turned out he was, indeed, half-Jewish. He confided in me that his father was Jewish and his mother was Russian. As a German prisoner of war for over three years, he had heard horrible things about what Hitler had done to the Jewish nation. Upon learning of these atrocities, some spark of Judaism ignited in him, and he was even ready to become a convert.

Alexei asked me to teach him Yiddish. He promised that he would arrange for me to be assigned to lighter work. He would even try to have me placed under his authority. As an engineer, he had some influence. He was friendly with all the administrators in the *lager*, and so he would take care of everything; he would even get me extra bread and cooked food, provided I taught him Yiddish.

I had a problem, though. I would gladly have taught Alexei Yiddish, if only I had had the means. But this was no simple task to accomplish in the camp. First of all, I didn't have one written document in Yiddish. I hadn't seen a printed Yiddish word since I had left home over five years ago. Furthermore, paper and pencils were very difficult to obtain. I poked fun at Alexei – he had certainly found the right place to learn Yiddish! But he wouldn't give up. He assured me that he would get hold of enough paper and pencils. He badgered me to spend half an hour to an hour with him every day when I came back from work – as much time I wanted, as long as I taught him Yiddish.

I had no choice but to undertake this 'holy work.' No matter what I did or said, Alexei wouldn't leave me alone for a minute. As soon as I arrived from work, he

approached me and led me over to a corner of a bunk, so I could begin our Yiddish lesson.

I also had pedagogical challenges. I was used to the standardized YIVO[54] orthography, and I knew very well that the Soviet spelling was quite different. So whatever I would teach Alexei would be confusing. I had a lot of trouble trying to explain this problem to him. He told me he didn't care about the difference between the Soviet spelling and the standardized Yiddish spelling. All he wanted was to learn Yiddish – regardless of the spelling.

"I'll write my parents," he said, "and ask them to send me Yiddish books."

Yes, the newcomers were able to receive packages from home. During the war, a parcel from home was a rarity, but now, many prisoners were getting them. How I envied those people. The packages contained mostly tobacco, zwieback, bacon, dried fruit, candies and preserves. I couldn't even hope to dream about such a thing!

There were heartbreaking scenes being played out between the *zhuliks* and the recipients of the parcels. When someone received a package, the *zhuliks* swarmed around him like bees around a honey pot. Sometimes the *zhuliks* would steal individual items from the parcel. Or they would grab the whole thing, and to hell with you! No matter how much the owner of the parcel protested, the *zhuliks* didn't care. As usual, they lived well by taking advantage of poor ordinary prisoners.

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[54] YIVO: The Yiddish orthography was standardized in 1936, by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in cooperation with the Central Yiddish School Organization in Poland. Deviations from the standardized orthography may be encountered in pre-1937 texts or in geographical areas, such as Russia, where this standardization was not adopted. These deviations are relatively minor for the reader who knows Yiddish, but can be troublesome for the learner of the language.

Several times I witnessed *zhuliks* deprive prisoners of their precious parcels. I remember once a prisoner was informed that he had received a long-awaited parcel from home. He went to the watchtower, where all packages were examined for contraband, to pick it up. Radiant with joy, clutching his precious parcel, he raced back to the barracks. No sooner did he set foot in the barracks, than a *zhulik* came up to him and ordered, "Hey, you, gimme some tobacco!"

The *zhulik* didn't bat an eyelash. As far as he was concerned, the contents of the parcel were his. The recipient of the package took a big handful of tobacco and handed it to the *zhulik*. Tobacco was worth a lot in the camp. Instead of thanking him for such a valuable offering, the *zhulik* got furious and screamed, "What! This is all the tobacco you give me!" He then grabbed the entire parcel from the owner, took a fistful of tobacco, hurled it at its owner and shouted, "Here, you son of a bitch, here's some tobacco for you!"

It couldn't be stopped. The ordinary *lagerniks* knew very well that there was nothing to be done. Their only recourse was to shut up, because if they uttered a single word, or if they went to the authorities to complain, they knew that they would be beaten up – in addition to being robbed.

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Despite all these difficulties, I did start to teach Alexei Yiddish. He was an avid student and learned the Yiddish alphabet quite effortlessly. I reassured him that once he received the books from home, he would figure out Yiddish writing quickly enough.

Actually, I didn't really believe that he would be sent Yiddish books, and I thought that he would lose interest in the meantime. In a sense, I felt that this was somewhat like a trial period – if he was truly interested in Judaism, he'd keep nagging me. But if this was just a passing fancy, he would forget about the whole thing, and I'd have one less matter to worry about.

As it turned out, he did, indeed, keep after me to teach him how to read. He suggested that I write out Yiddish songs that I remembered from home, and said that he didn't care if I even made up stories and legends for him to read.

I set out to work. I translated the *Akeida* from the *Khumash* into Yiddish, and also the story of *M'khiras Yosef.* I prepared all kinds of fables, mostly the *Mishlei Shualim*[55] folk tales. Alexei was particularly impressed by the story of Khoni Ha'magel, the tale of a man who planted a carob tree. As the story goes, everyone laughed at him because it takes seventy years for a carob tree to produce its fruit. It so happened that Khoni Ha'magel fell into a long deep sleep, and when he woke up seventy years later, he noticed that someone was eating the fruit of the carob tree that he had planted. He tried to tell them who he was, but nobody believed him. They made fun of him, and called him a crazy fool. Khoni Ha'magel remembered what the sages had taught him in school – that a man with no friends is better off dead. He wished for death, and did, indeed, die shortly afterwards.

Alexei enjoyed this tale so much that he learned it by heart, word for word.

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[55] *Mishlei Shualim:* Written by Berekhiah ben Natronai Ha'nakdan (12th-13th century). (English translation by M. Hadas *Fables of a Jewish Aesop, 1967).*

In the meantime, Alexei received his parcel. Fortunately, the *zhuliks* had some measure of respect for him, due to his position as engineer, and were afraid to start up with him. They knew he would find a way to take revenge on them, so they left him alone. He received three books: a songbook by a Yiddish poet, a novel by a Yiddish author, and translations into Yiddish of selected works by the Russian author, Lermontov.

Those books were like a brilliant light shining before my eyes. I hadn't seen the Yiddish printed word in years, and now I had three Yiddish books that I could almost call my own!

I must confess, however, that I enjoyed the book of Lermontov's stories –superbly translated by M. Khashevsky – more than the original works by the Soviet Jewish writers. The volume of Yiddish songs, unfortunately, was not particularly gratifying. The songs – by a famous Yiddish poet who now lives in Israel – while artistically impressive, did in no way quench my thirst for literature. They were full of Soviet propaganda, glorifying Stalin. Despite the many Jewish motifs in this poetry and the Jewish angst that could be felt throughout the volume, the Soviet propaganda was as conspicuous as a cat screeching during a melodious concert.

The novel attracted me at first, as it was based on a Jewish theme. But as soon as I began to read it, I realized that it, too, was to be a disappointment. It was the story of how Jews, together with Russians, defended their motherland against the Nazis. They helped to evacuate areas occupied by the Germans, and were so patriotic that when they came to an ammunition factory, they allowed the workers to continue producing arms, instead of forcing them to leave the premises. The main theme of the novel was the

glorification of the brotherhood between Jews and Russians. There was even a section in which a Jew and a gentile Russian got married and lived happily ever after, with no regard to assimilation.

It wasn't long before Alexei learned to read Yiddish fluently. He had been very familiar with Lermontov's work, and had remembered many of the stories by heart. Since he knew German well, he was quickly able to figure out what he was reading.

Once Alexei knew how to read Yiddish, he requested that I teach him *drevne evreyskie molitvi* – how to *daven*. At the beginning I thought he wanted me to teach him Hebrew, but I soon realized that he was mainly interested in Jewish prayers and hymns.

"Sometimes," he sighed, "I would like to go sit in a corner, and chant some Jewish prayers. There is so much lyricism, so much devotion and love in *drevne evreyskie molitvi*! If only I had the right words, I feel that I would be able to fill a vacuum in my heart; I would indeed be spiritually fulfilled."

"Nobody here in the camp," he told me, "knows the *drevne evreyskie molitvi* like you do. I don't know if I could ever meet anybody else in the *lager* who knows the prayers by heart, and who could write them out for me."

"We Jews," I cautioned him, "do not accept converts willingly."

I wanted to see what an impression that would make on him.

"I'm half-Jewish anyway," he replied. "I'm sure they would accept me without too much hesitation."

I tried in vain to tell him of Hillel's saying, '*Love your neighbour as yourself* is the essence of the whole Torah; the rest is commentary.'

"That's just an abstraction, a mere symbol. It's more suitable for a legend," he protested. "I'll never reach my goal with answers like that."

Alexei was right. Nobody except Haïm Schichman and I had the ability to teach him these things. Some Jews in the camp may have remembered some of the *davening* by heart, but they would certainly not have been able to write out a hymn like *Adon Olam* or *Yigdal* correctly, as we could. Haïm Schichman had been liberated in the meantime, so I was the only one who could teach Alexei how to *daven*.

If Alexei had not had the privilege of living in a small tent with some of his fellow engineers, we would certainly not have had a chance to work together. In the regular barracks there were hundreds of people, and it would have been impossible to separate ourselves from the crowds and devote ourselves to intellectual pursuits. Alexei's colleagues hated me. They didn't know he was half-Jewish, so they laughed at him and wondered why he was involved in such unusual activities.

"You'll become a Jew, and call me *goy*," one of his barracks mates, a Russian engineer, teased him.

This Russian engineer believed that the word *goy* was the worst possible insult a Jew could utter to describe a Christian.

"Tell me the truth," this smart aleck taunted me. "What's the real meaning of the word *goy*?"

I tried to explain that *goy* had the same meaning as *natsmen*. The Russians used the term *natsmen* to describe Asiatic peoples, such as those from Georgia or Kazakhstan.

This word didn't have the slightest derogatory meaning. It simply meant that they were of a different nationality; they were foreigners, not Russians.

I quickly realized that no matter what I said, my words fell on deaf ears. That same engineer, with all his education, believed that Jews used the blood of Christian children to bake their matzos for the Passover Seder.

"I read in the paper that many Jews were arrested for that," he contended, certain that he knew what he was talking about.

Needless to say, I wasn't surprised that his fellow engineers were opposed to having Alexei learn Yiddish. I have to add – to Alexei's credit – he didn't let these comments get to him.

"He's just an moron; he doesn't know what he's talking about!" Alexei declared. "What can you expect from an anti-Semite like him? We'd be best to just ignore him and all the rest of those smart alecks."

Alexei was quite angry that the engineer could believe such nonsense, but he just let it pass, and didn't make a big deal out of it.

"Do you know," Alexei asked him, "that the Russian and the Jewish cultures are two of the richest cultures in the world?"

I had come quite a way with Alexei. He had learned to read Yiddish, and had begun to memorize some prayers. In truth, he *davened* like a convert, but he was making progress. Unfortunately, he was sent to another labour camp, so I had no idea how far he would have evolved in his 'Jewishness.' I received regards from him from time to time, but I never saw him again. I was not able to find out first hand if Alexei did, indeed,

make the sacrifices necessary to become a Jew, but I am sure of one thing: he certainly had the ambition to do so!

Chapter 36 - A Higher Position

Before Haïm Schichman was liberated, his wife found out where he was through the GULAG, the Main Directorate for Corrective Labour Camps. Haïm's wife and two children were among the lucky ones who had managed to flee to Tashkent when the war began, so they were saved from the Nazi hell.

We all wondered how his wife had found out where her husband was, when so many others during the war had lost contact with their families and never saw their loved ones again.

As soon as Haïm's wife got an answer to her letter, she immediately began sending him parcels, which he would share with his acquaintances. "Let them also rejoice in my happiness!" he used to say.

When Haïm found out that he was to be liberated, he was beside himself with joy, and with reason. To be freed from a Soviet jail after six long years of exile was quite an achievement. He ran into the barrack, beaming and ecstatic, and shouted, "Congratulate me. I'm going home to my wife and children. I'm free!"

We all embraced him and wished him well. If truth be told, we had a pain in our hearts, since we were still incarcerated, but we did not begrudge Haïm his happiness. We were genuinely delighted for him. We had the feeling that the ice was starting to melt,

and the chains that bound us to the Soviet jails were beginning to break. If they were freeing some prisoners, pretty soon, we might be next…

Haïm called me aside and said, "I'm expecting a parcel from my wife, but since I'm being freed, I've arranged for you to have it. I beg of you to forgive me," he said. "Maybe I didn't always treat you right, and perhaps I didn't always let you have enough days off when I was the *lager* paramedic…"

"You did so much for me," I interrupted, "and for the other Jews in the camp as well. I'm sure that if you'd had the opportunity, you would've done much more."

"As soon as I get home, I'll do everything I can to send you a parcel," he promised.

We didn't have much time to speak. It was already dusk, and a light spring breeze was blowing, although it felt more like winter than spring. We could see the Northern Lights dancing in the sky like waves on the sea. The *dezhurnyi* came over to us and exhorted Haïm to leave the camp right away and go to the station. The train would soon be leaving to Pechora, where Haïm had to procure the supplies he would need for his trip. We hardly had time to say goodbye, but I heard Haïm call out, "Next year in Jerusalem!"[56]

He disappeared on the other side of the barbed wire, just as the Northern Lights were fading from the sky…

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[56] This saying has added significance, as it is recited during the Passover Seder. Since Passover celebrates the liberation of the Jews from Egypt, Haïm used this phrase to wish the author freedom from the Soviet prison camp within the year.

Haïm did, indeed, keep his word and sent me a parcel from Central Asia. Now I, too, had the opportunity to experience the glorious feeling of receiving a package.

Haïm asked me in one of his letters to let him know whether I was able to make any use of the parcels, and if so, he would send me more. In other words, he wanted to find out if the *zhuliks* were getting their dirty paws on what was rightfully mine.

Actually – believe it or not – the *zhuliks* were now leaving me alone. By this time, I had been elevated to a higher position – I had become an interpreter for Hungarian, Romanian and German speaking prisoners. New types of inmates had recently been arriving in the penal colony, and when they had to be interrogated, the camp authorities sent for me. The fact that I was closer to the main authorities was reason enough for the *zhuliks* to stay out of my way. They had come to the conclusion that it wasn't in their best interest to bother me, because it could cost them dearly. The *zhuliks* were afraid of the authorities, so they were grateful that I just left them alone. The *zhuliks* and I had set up a sort of unwritten 'non-aggression pact.'

One *zhulik,* unaware that I was now in a higher position, once tried to start up with me. I felt like an influential person, and so I wasn't afraid to stand up to him. He threatened me with his dirty *zhulik* tongue, but I was already inured to this language and gave as good as I got. When the *zhulik* later found out from his comrades that he had committed a blunder, he came to apologize.

"Be well, Lyova," he said fawningly. (He was sweet talking me, but I could see right through him – it was all a sham.) "Please forget what I said yesterday. I was only joking. Besides, I simply didn't know that it was *you*."

Little by little I worked my way up in the *lager*. If – God forbid – I had been destined to spend a few more years there, I would probably have even been able to elevate myself to yet a higher rank.

I wasn't a greenhorn any more. By now, I was an old timer and commanded some respect. My little position as interpreter gave me the opportunity to get together with higher officials. And besides, I had learned how to curse fluently in Russian, so of course I was held in high regard!

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Even with my new status, I didn't ever want to get on the wrong side of any *zhulik*. From my experience in the *lager*, I learned that it wasn't worth starting up with them, because you could pay dearly for it. They were organized and stood up for each other, so you were helpless if they decided they had it in for you. Besides, they were sometimes so uncontrollable that you could lose your life if you got on their bad side. If they perceived that someone had sinned against them, they would just arrange to have him killed off. Once they decided to get rid of somebody, the *zhuliks* would play cards amongst themselves, and the loser ended up having to perform the dirty deed…

Very few inmates wore civilian clothes – the kind of clothing that could give the impression that they were not prisoners, but free citizens. Of course, the *zhuliks* always managed to get hold of some better-quality clothes, and this was reason enough for them to get more respect. A *zhulik* could be the biggest *dokhodiaga* in the world, but you'd be afraid of him nonetheless. I came to the conclusion that if an ordinary prisoner could get his hands on a civilian jacket and a pair of pants, then he would most likely command

some respect. And above all, if he had a pair of leather boots and a cap, then you might even think that he was a *nachalnik*, and he'd be treated deferentially.

I remembered how I myself had arrived with some half-decent clothing from home five years earlier. Many new Hungarian and Romanian people – my countrymen – had recently arrived, so I took advantage of this opportunity, and tried to see if I could get some civilian clothes from one of the newly-arrived *lagerniks.* I had a bit of sugar, tobacco and bread in reserve, and with these items I was able to obtain everything I needed as a *blatnoi* – a prison 'boss.'[57]

Let them think they were dealing with a *zhulik*…

"What do you need all those things for?" I asked one of the new *lagerniks*. "It won't take two days and the *zhuliks* will rob you from head to foot. Sell me a few of your rags, and we'll both benefit from this transaction!"

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A commission came to the *lager* to assign people to the hospital for two weeks. Amazingly, not one *dokhodiaga* was accepted by this commission. Only the top workers – prisoners with a good record as *Stakhanovites* – were designated. All those sent to the hospital would be given a *Stakhanovets payok* and they wouldn't even have to do a bit of work!

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[57] Translator's note: *Blatnoi:* a catchall term used by hoodlums to refer to themselves and their way of life. There was a prison hierarchy in the camps. On top, and definitely in command, were the *blatnye* or "bosses," professional criminals who formed a well-structured, very well-organized clan, with laws of its own. These bosses were the real power brokers within the penal structure. The author has become so inured to the prison system by this point, and has learned somewhat how to wheel and deal by now, so he states – not without some irony – that he can practically pass himself off as a hardened criminal, with upper-class criminal status.

We later found out the reason for this commission. Apparently, there was a shortage of good workers to carry out very difficult work in the coal mines in Khal'mer-Yu. So the commission was mandated to find able prisoners to do this task. These poor souls would be fed well and coddled for a short period of time to build up their strength, whereupon they would be classified as strong and healthy enough to toil in the coal mines.

Khal'mer-Yu is several hundred kilometres north of Pechora, past Vorkuta, close to the Arctic Ocean. Pechora is bitterly cold with unusual storms summer and winter; Vorkuta's climate is even harsher. But Khal'mer-Yu is the worst by far. Not for nothing is it written, 'Evil originates in the North.'[58]

One of the *lager* leaders wanted very much to get rid of me, so he put my name on the list of the excellent workers and turned me into a *Stakhanovets*. At first, I didn't know the purpose of this commission. When I later found out where they wanted to send me, I became alarmed. Then I hatched a plan.

I quietly let myself be fed. Six weeks later, when the commission came by to see how we were doing, I complained that I had been a *dokhodiaga* all these years, that I was by nature a weak and sick person, and had never been able to do hard labour. They ended up by sending me back to the camp I had been in before.

When the *lager* official who had wanted to get rid of me saw that I had returned, he was so furious, I thought he would have a stroke on the spot. "You, *Zhid*!" he

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[58] Jeremiah 1:14: *Then the Lord said unto me: Out of the north the evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land.*

screamed. "You won't get away with this!"

"I'm not afraid of you," I replied calmly. "Try to touch me, and I'll know who to turn to!"

Who could ever have imagined that I, a *dokhodiaga* would ever advance to such a level!

Chapter 37 - Portnoi

It looked like I was destined to have it a little easier in my last year at the Pechora penal colony. The doctors classified me as a semi-invalid, so I was given the right to work inside the zone, where the tasks were not particularly difficult. The real hard work was digging in the mines, laying train tracks and felling trees.

In the zone, I became the *lager latutnik*, mender. Now, looking back as I write about my experience in Russian exile, I refer to myself as the camp *latutnik*, but in the *lager*, they gave me a more exalted title: *portnoi*, tailor.

It may be difficult for the reader to understand how I became a *portnoi* all of a sudden, because I had never held a needle in my hand before in my life. That's how things were done in Russia. I became a tailor overnight! The *nachalnik* had said he was short a *portnoi*, and there was nobody to assign this job to, so he gave it to me.

"You will be the *portnoi* in the camp!" the *nachalnik* ordered me, without any further ado.

Just as a former *dokhodiaga* like me could stand up against *zhuliks* and camp commanders if necessary, so, too, could I become a tailor, if necessary. I had worked myself up to a level where I was able to accomplish feats beyond my capabilities.

The simple fact that I became a *portnoi* made my life a lot easier. There's a very big difference between sitting with a needle and working in the woods... Besides, the kitchen workers had to come to me regularly to have their clothes mended, and so I became closer to them. When they saw me at the window as I was receiving my daily ration of cooked food, they said to each other, "Oh, this is the tailor. Give him a double portion."

The head cook had a special request for me. "If you, Lyova," he asked me, "would take the effort and sew a suit for me, you will never go hungry in this camp so long as I am cook."

"Of course, Vanka," I replied. "Why wouldn't I sew a suit for you? Just give me some material to work with, and I'll sew you a suit good enough to make the *nachalnik* himself jealous!"

Until the cook would find out what kind of 'tailor' I was, I could get better and larger quantities of food.

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My life in the camp got easier for another reason. The new *lager* commander, Lyova Elgart, was a Jew and a friend of mine. Lyova had worked with me previously in a few camps; he had even been my *brigadir* at one time. He had been arrested twelve years earlier. In his hometown, Kiev, he had been a *kladovshchik*, a storekeeper. When the books didn't balance, he was sentenced to ten years for misappropriating state funds. In the camp he had also advanced to becoming a stock clerk. Then his sin repeated itself: once again the books didn't balance. He had only a few months left before the end of his

sentence, but since he'd had a record from before as a *kladovshchik* who'd embezzled state property, and since he'd been sentenced to ten years because of that, the *lager* judge had no problem convicting him to another ten years.

Lyova complained to me about his bitter luck. "I left a son and a wife at home; my son is a grown man already and he doesn't even know his own father!"

During the war, his wife and child managed to escape from one of the greatest atrocities in the Ukraine. According to her letters, they miraculously survived the slaughter at Babi-Yar.

"The great writer, Ilya Ehrenburg[59] himself," she wrote, "even promised that he would immortalize me in one of his works, as one of the bravest women of the Soviet Union…"

Lyova Elgart's wife didn't know that he'd been sentenced to ten more years, and that he would have to remain incarcerated for many years before being released – if he would be freed at all. He was already over forty and had a heart problem. His wife asked in her letters why he wasn't home yet. As far as she was aware, he was sentenced to only ten years, so what was he still doing in prison? He assured her in his letters that he would be released shortly, but she couldn't wait.

Thanks to Lyova, my life was a little easier during my last year in the Pechora camp. As *lager* commander, he had the opportunity to exclude me when hard work was assigned – and he did it as often as he could.

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[59]Ilya Ehrenburg, 1891–1967, Russian journalist and novelist, who was noted for his articles about the two world wars.

"Go to the barracks," he would order me, "so I won't see you standing there."

I would obey, and thus give him the opportunity to avoid having to send me out to do hard labour.

"I ask you one thing," he once said, while we were having a friendly chat. "One day if you are ever freed, and you happen to pass through Kiev, go to my home, and give personal regards to my wife and my son. Tell them how much I miss them… Tell them I will be home soon…"

"I ask you also," he requested several times, "if you manage to make it to another country, then wake up the whole world. Tell everybody how people live in Soviet jails… how innocent Jewish people who tried to escape the Nazis are treated in Russia… Let the whole world know how the damn Russkies treat innocent people in their concentration camps!"

Unfortunately, I never did succeed in shaking up the whole world. And worse still, I was even unable to grant Lyova's first wish – that I meet in person and give greetings to his wife and son. Indeed, my conscience often bothered me for not carrying out the wishes that he honestly deserved to have fulfilled.

Chapter 38 - Stalin Wears Boots

New 'merchandise' kept on arriving – more *etaps* full of prisoners continued pouring out of the cattle cars. At every opportunity, I would go over to the arrival area and ask if there were any people from home. Like all prisoners, I kept on searching for a friendly or familiar face. One day, I overheard some people speak Yiddish. That's how I found out that there were three Bessarabian Jews among the newcomers – all from Kishinev.

Two were married. After the war, they had came home from the front, and had managed, with much difficulty, to reunite with their families, who had been evacuated to Soviet Central Asia; with much difficulty, they had succeeded, little by little, to get settled in war-torn Kishinev, which had been their home before the Holocaust and then – suddenly they got arrested!

All three had lost contact with their families, and had no idea about what had been happening at home for the last several months. One of them, a tall man with a gentle tanned face by the name of Haïm Fishman had left a wife who was very advanced in her pregnancy. Haïm and I became friends from the first moment we met.

I tried to help these new arrivals in any way I could. I still remembered what it had felt like to be a new *lagernik*, and I could recall Eliakhin's mocking laughter and his cruel taunts, *Ha, ha, ha! A dokhodiaga like you is sentenced for three years! It won't take a year and you'll drop dead just like an old horse! Ha ha ha!*

At that time, I had fully believed that Eliakhin was right. But it appears as if I was destined to live, whereas Eliakhin was already long dead. I was not – God forbid – vengeful towards him, but I will never forget how he laughed at me when I was down, and in desperate need of comfort.

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Another Jewish prisoner from Kishinev was with me in the *lager* – a young man named Yefim Spack. Despite his youth, he had been sentenced to ten years for anti-Soviet agitation. He himself didn't know the exact reason for his arrest – or so he said. I only found out his secret from his parents after I was freed.

I will get back to his story shortly.

When Spack found out from me that three Jews from his hometown were among the new 'merchandise,' he ran up to them, full of excitement. Wow! That was something – people from the same town!

"What're your names?" he asked breathlessly. "Where did you live in Kishinev? Since when have you been away from home? How long is your sentence?"

Yefim Spack wanted to know everything at once. On the whole, he was a hothead. He was barely twenty years old, and he had already been incarcerated for three full years.

The new prisoners – poor things – complained that the situation in the camp was extremely bad, and they truly didn't know how they would be able to stand it. They felt awful. First they had been in prison for several months, and after that, they had been transported in cattle cars for a few weeks; they suffered from hunger, thirst and cold. Now that they had arrived in the *lager* over two days ago, nobody cared whether they got a bite of bread to eat, or whether they had a place to go, or a rag to cover themselves with.

I tried to console them as best I could. I reassured them that it wouldn't always be like that, and with time, the situation would get a bit better. But hot-tempered Spack interrupted me. Instead of comforting his countrymen, he laughed at them – just like Eliakhin had taunted me when I was a fresh *lagernik*.

"Don't worry, don't worry," Spack mocked. "You'll be complaining even more later!"

It was painful to see Spack take advantage of their suffering with his stupid jokes. And, in truth, at that moment, standing beside the newcomers, I felt like a wealthy man next to paupers. Somehow, I had got used to the camp miseries and had also worked myself up to a little position. I tried as much as I could to help my newly arrived comrades. But how much can one helpless person help others as helpless as he?

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We managed to get the newcomers assigned to our barrack. Being together felt homier and less sorrowful. We tried as much as possible to forget our miseries, by entertaining ourselves with all kinds of humourous stories, mostly political. The Bessarabians had brought some new jokes from after the war:

"When Truman met Stalin," one recounted, "they had a private talk and discussed the problems of the working class in Russia and in America. Stalin asked Truman, 'How much does an ordinary worker earn in America?' Truman answered, 'Around three or four hundred dollars a month.' So Stalin asked, 'How much does a worker need to live on for a month?' Truman answered, 'About a hundred-fifty or two-hundred dollars.' Stalin was amazed, 'What does the worker do with the rest of the money that he earns?' he asked. Truman answered scornfully, 'Whatever he wants.' Then Truman asked Stalin how much a worker earns per month in Russia. Stalin answered that a worker earns between three and four hundred rubles, and he added that a worker in Russia needs at least seven or eight hundred a month to live, so Truman asked him, 'Where does the worker take the extra few hundred rubles he needs every month?' Stalin answered, 'From wherever he wants!' "

Haïm Fishman told us a joke about what happened in the forties, when the Russians marched into Bessarabia. "They called the factory workers," he related, "and told them that from then on, the factories belonged to the workers, and each worker had a share in the factory where he was working. So a woman asked, 'Maybe you can pay me my share in money?' "

No matter how some Russians hated the Communist system, they still thought that as long as Lenin lived, he had incorporated the NEP – New Economic Project – that improved the situation of the peasants. Actually, during Lenin's time there were not as many arrests as during Stalin's time. "Therefore there is a saying," said one of the

Bessarabians, " 'Lenin was wearing shoes, so he avoided the mud as much as possible, but Stalin wears boots!' "

Yefim Spack told a joke. (Incidentally, I later found out that he had been sentenced on account of this joke, but that didn't stop him from telling it again.)

"A Russian diplomat," Spack declared heatedly, as was his nature, "was abroad visiting a Jew on the day before Yom Kippur. The Russian heard the Jew mention *Kol Nidre*[60] many times as he talked with his family. The Russian asked the Jew what *Kol Nidre* meant. It was difficult for the Jew to explain this concept, since the Russian had been brought up in the Soviet atmosphere of godlessness, and he had no clue about religion. The Jew simplified it for him, and said that you fast a whole day and night, and you say a prayer called *Kol Nidre*. The Russian jumped for joy because he understood it now. 'I'm not sure exactly what *Kol Nidre* means, but I gather that it has something to do with the word *kolkhoz*. For you Jews, you say *Kol Nidre*, and you fast for only 24 hours, but for us Russians, Stalin said '*Kolkhoz*!'[61] and we've been fasting for thirty years."

When I was in the camp, I never knew the precise reason for Yefim Spack's sentence, but when I went to Kishinev, after my first liberation in 1947, I found out from his parents that their son had been sent to prison because of that joke. Apparently, Yefim had recounted it to a group of people, and he didn't know that one of them was an NKVD agent. The agent squealed on him, and Yefim was sentenced to ten years.

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[60] *Kol Nidre*: The prayer opening the Yom Kippur evening service.
[61] *Kolkhoz*: Russian collective farms, which were considered to have caused widespread famine.

Chapter 39 - My World Became Dark

It was already more than a year since the war had ended. Fascism in Europe was eradicated, and it would seem that anti-Semitism would also have received a death sentence. But that was not the case in the Soviet labour colonies. Not only were we insulted and labelled *Zhid*, we also had to listen to anti-Semitic stories about Jews collaborating with the Fascists during the war. Here is one of these magnificent stories:

"When the Germans occupied the Ukraine, they chased the Jews out of all the cities and brought them to one location. The Nazis ordered the Jews to dig their own graves and step into them. They then rounded up some Christian citizens and commanded them to shoot the Jews in the graves. The Christians refused. The Germans threatened the Christians – if they disobeyed, they would also be shot. The Christians stood firm – they would not shoot innocent people. The Nazis then commanded the Jews to come out and had the Christians take their place inside the grave pits. Thereupon, the Germans ordered the Jews to shoot the Christians. The Jews were prepared to shoot all the Christians! (A big lie!) Some actually fired their weapons, but the Germans had wisely given the Jews unloaded rifles. The Christians were then ordered again to trade places with the Jews. This time, recognizing the perfidy of the treacherous Jews, the

Christians gladly obeyed the order to shoot them. (It's a known fact that a massacre had taken place at that particular location, but neither Christians nor Jews had been ordered to shoot each other. Indeed, they perished together.)

Needless to say, many inmates of the camp believed such anti-Semitic tales. No matter what I did to try to convince them that those stories contained false logic, they continued to insist that they were true. They refused to accept that a Jew would never betray his rescuer, nor anyone who takes his side in time of need.

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Even though I had already got used to the anti-Semitism in the Soviet camps, this antagonism bothered me more than anything else. The frigid climate in Northern Siberia was a hardship for Jews and gentiles alike; likewise, the wretched conditions in the penal colonies – the arduous labour, the hunger, the lice, illness and pestilence – were universal for Jews, as well as Christians. But when it came to attacking the dignity of someone as a result of his nationality, it was always the *Zhid*. If you wanted insult anyone in the *lager* –a Russian or even an Asian – you had only to call him a *Zhid*, and he would recoil as if a snake had bitten him. You could utter the most vulgar obscenities, like *po-materi*, and nobody would care, but if you called a non-Jew a *Zhid*, he would jump out of his skin.

Especially now, after the war, I believed that it was common knowledge that whoever had survived the atrocities could go back home. Even in the places where a Jew's life had been in danger if he so much as showed his face – I presumed that anti-Semitism had been eradicated. Yet here in the camp it blossomed.

Some Jewish *nachalniks* could have made life easier for the Jews, but they seldom did. More often than not, they wanted to look good in front of the Russians, so they showed indifference to their own brethren. If some Jews had illusions that their salvation would come from a Jewish *nachalnik*, their hopes were dashed.

Yes, the war was long over, but we, *perebezchiks* did not know when the war would end for us. It appeared as if we were the most sinful creatures in Soviet Russia.

We were already veteran prisoners. Little wonder, then, that we were fed up with the camp conditions and sick to the point of desperation. Many of my co-'criminals' had died a long time ago, and as for the rest of us – if we would remain prisoners much longer, Stalin wouldn't have to worry about granting us our freedom.

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My being assigned lighter work didn't do much to improve my physical condition. In the *lager*, a *dokhodiaga* remained a *dokhodiaga*, no matter what. Again I was sent to the hospital, but since I was not ill enough to require bed rest, I became a *sanitar*, a male nurse. As a *sanitar*, I had the opportunity to move more freely around the barracks, and consequently, got to meet more people. I especially looked forward to getting together with other Jews.

One day I bumped into Dudi Goldstein, who had already been in the camp for a long time. Dudi showed me a postcard he had received from his brother, Yossi, who was in Sighet and was getting ready to move to the Holy Land.

I couldn't believe my eyes, but it was true. The Sighet postmark was on the stamp. I read the postcard, and my whole world became dark. I found out that there were

very few Jews remaining in Sighet. All of the Sighet Jews – except a handful who had managed by some miracle to save themselves – perished in the gas chambers in Auschwitz. I also learned that only one member of my family from Sighet and Satmar[62] – my niece Cili – survived. All the rest – my parents, two sisters, their husbands and children, thirteen in all – perished in the gas chambers.

I felt like part of my heart had been torn out. My knees buckled under me, my head began to spin, and I actually fainted. I knew that European Jews would not have had an easy time of it, but who could have expected such a catastrophe! The devil himself wouldn't have been able to paint a darker picture. I learned this heartbreaking news so suddenly, it was as a bomb had exploded within me. I felt as if I wouldn't be able to stand it.

This was the first time that I found out that the crematoria existed, and that Hitler – cursed be his name and memory – had caused the wholesale destruction of millions of us in the gas chambers. Here was another example of how isolated I was. I discovered quite by accident something so monumental that it was common knowledge to even babes in their cradles. The enormous tragedy that we Jews call the Holocaust – I only learned about in 1947.

After a while, I began to recover from this shattering blow, and I came to a positive conclusion: I realized that I should not have regretted leaving my home, and having been the cause of the departure of *B* and others. Many poor souls had perished

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[62] Satmar: Satu Mare, Romania

here, but without question, if they had stayed at home, they would most likely not have survived.

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Fischel Rubin, the prisoner who had attempted to run away so he would get shot, was back in the hospital again. Now he didn't have to worry about being sent back to the *lager* to work. Alas, he had met with a great misfortune – he had to have both feet amputated. After he had been discharged from the hospital the first time, he was almost completely recovered from his wounds; he only limped on one foot. Then they forced him to perform difficult tasks. He complained that he couldn't walk a long way with his crippled leg; consequently he requested to be assigned to the zone.

"I'm an invalid," he had protested. "I can't walk far and be expected to do heavy work."

His complaints fell on deaf ears. He refused to go to work. In other words, he was an *otkazchik.* The *nachalnik* ordered him to be kept in *kartzer* until he agreed to go to work with his brigade. Fischel sat in isolation for two weeks. The isolation chamber was so cold that both his feet froze and required amputation. It was so sad to see him with both legs bandaged at the knee. Whenever I looked at him, I felt guilty, because I, too, could have suffered a similar fate.

"The NKVD doesn't have to be afraid of me," he muttered. "Now they can be sure that I'll never run away again."

Another tragedy befell Moshe Veig, the first Sigheter[63] I had met in the Stanislav jail. A train ran over him and he was killed immediately. Most likely, he had become disappointed in his 'comrades' and had committed suicide.

=♦=

In the hospital I bumped into an acquaintance, another *sanitar* from Rakhov, by the name of Shlome Wieder.

Shlome and I had been together, through thick and thin, in all kinds of camps and jails. Now we were together again. Since he was from Rakhov, in the Carpathians, he was sure that he would be released soon.

"I'm a Carpathian," he told me, "and Carpathian Ukraine is now under the Soviet regime. I'm automatically a Soviet citizen, and as such, I will be freed soon."

He informed me that he had written a *zayavlenie*, a request to Barbanov, *nachalnik-upravleniya*, the administrator in charge of the Pechora camps, and he was convinced that once the *nachalnik* studied his case, he would be liberated.

"It doesn't matter if you've written a *zayavlenie* or not," I told him. "It won't make a difference even if all the *perebezchiks* from Carpathia do likewise. I highly doubt that your freedom will come because of your *zayavlenie*. You'll be released only when a *prikaz*, an order, will be issued to release all the Carpathians. Then you'll be among them."

Shlome Wieder hailed from the same shtetl as Leah'ke, Herschel Pollack's former fiancée. Herschel Pollack – poor thing – was already long dead. Shlome and I

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[63] From his hometown of Sighet

reminisced about our many acquaintances who had died in the camps, as well as those whose fate was unknown to us. We especially remembered Herschel and his Leah'ke. What a passionate love that they had shared, and how tragically it had ended!

=♦=

Not long afterwards, the Carpathian prisoners were, indeed, released. What an achievement for Shlome! To be freed after six years of imprisonment.

Once prisoners were informed that they would be liberated, the *lager* authorities chased them like the Egyptians had driven the Jews out after the tenth plague. There was no time for them to even say goodbye to their comrades. They were required to follow all kinds of procedures. They had to go to the office and record the things they were taking with them. They had to run from one *nachalnik* to the other, and have each one sign all kinds of declarations, especially attesting that the *nachalnik* had nothing against them. Once they were rid of these formalities, the *dezhurnyi* would come and kick them out of the *lager*. *Perebezchiks* who had no idea when their term would end were particularly overwhelmed, since they were completely unprepared. Consequently, they didn't have a chance to say goodbye to the friends who would remain afterwards for an undetermined term. No wonder Shlome was so busy.

"I beg of you Shlome," I said, "Don't forget your brother in need. Write me a postcard from time to time. Let me feel I have somebody in the free world who remembers me sometimes. My main request is that in case you meet somebody who knows something about *B* or her brother, Oscar, please let me know."

Naturally, Shlome promised that he would do what he could. He barely had time to embrace me and say goodbye, when a *lager* commander chased him out of the camp.

"I hope," he shouted, "that you will also be freed shortly!"

How many times had I seen prisoners released. By this time, people were being freed on a daily basis. Some of them who had been admitted for the same 'crime' as I, and others who had committed true crimes were being let out earlier than me. I was already a veteran *lagernik*, and wouldn't be able to survive if I had to stay here much longer.

Shlome kept his word, and sent me a postcard. He was sad to relate that after having waited so long for his freedom, he arrived home, only to learn that none of his loved ones remained alive. But he had met with some acquaintances who were very happy to see him. It was quite something to have survived and been liberated. He asked if I had been granted my freedom yet, and if I needed anything. He hadn't heard anything about *B* yet, but should he have any news, he would let me know immediately.

=♦=

Not long after the Carpathian *perebezchiks* were released, the Romanian *perebezchiks* were informed that they, too, would be freed. As well, the first group of 'pioneers' who had run to Russia in 1940 after the Hungarian occupation of Transylvania, were also going to be liberated since they, too were considered Romanians. But the Hungarian *perebezchiks* were still incarcerated. Since I had run away from home two months later, I had become a Hungarian citizen, so I had to wait a little longer.

I had an intuition that the Romanian *perebezchiks* would be freed before the Hungarians. One day, when the war was still going on full blast, I had read an article in a Russian newspaper. The article stated, 'Since the Hungarians are active collaborators of the Nazi regime, they are already potential allies of Hitler's armies. The Hungarians are no less our enemies than the Fascist hordes. They are killing and destroying innocent Soviet citizens. Therefore, when the day of vengeance will come, the Hungarians will get their retribution. They will not be forgiven. Their sentence will be great. The day of revenge is near!'

Already then, as I read that article, I felt that I was also chosen to be a target of that revenge. According to Soviet logic, I, together with all the other Hungarian *perebezchiks*, was categorized as a hardened criminal. Ironically, the truly guilty collaborators would only be punished after the war, whereas they took their revenge on us many years earlier.

I had found out from a Russian news bulletin that the Romanians had successfully driven the Germans out of their territory several months before the war ended. Therefore, I concluded that the Romanian *perebezchiks* would be freed before the Hungarians. And indeed, it so happened.

When the Romanian *perebezchiks* were released, and I still remained in the camp, I became more depressed than ever. It was so unfair – that the same people, from the same place, were being freed en masse, and I had to remain behind barbed wire! I felt that I would explode – and that I would never be able to bear it…

Chapter 40 - FREE!

Finally the hour I had been waiting for arrived. I was summoned and told I would be set free. I was the only *perebezchik* in this camp. As a matter of fact, I was the last *perebezchik* of my category to be released for that crime in all of the Soviet camps. It was the end of February 1947.

I became a free person in a country where I had nobody – no relatives or even acquaintances to turn to. Actually, I did know some people in the Carpathians – my former comrades in the *lager* – but I wasn't permitted to go to there. The Carpathian Mountains are situated near Romania, and I wasn't allowed to live too close to the border. Where could I go? Who could I go to? I had lived in Chernovitz, before the war. Perhaps I would meet an acquaintance there from the past. Haïm Fishman and Yefim Spack suggested that I ask for permission to go to their hometown, Kishinev, since they would be able to give me the names of people I could contact there.

When I went to the NKVD to have my release papers signed, they let me know that as a former prisoner, I had no right to live in larger cities like Kishinev or Chernovitz.[64] They advised me to choose a smaller town between the two cities. I

[64] The rules regarding ex-prisoners were arbitrary and often contradictory.

remembered that there was a shtetl by the name of Belz, situated between Chernovitz and Kishinev. I knew about Belz from the song, '*Belz, My Shteiteleh, Belz,'* and as the birthplace of one of my favourite Hebrew poets, Yakov Fikhman.

Finally, I got a permit to move to Belz, and on that same day, I was given a ticket to go to the *peresylka* in Pechora where I had stayed six years earlier as a new *lagernik*.

My Bessarabian friends hastily wrote letters home and begged me to visit their loved ones. Haïm Fishman was particularly anxious for me to go to see his parents and wife, and urge them to do their utmost to free him from this hellhole as soon as possible. My friends barely had a chance to hand me their letters, and I was forced to leave the *lager*. When I looked back, I could see the sombre looks on their faces as they watched me go. They were probably going through the same torment I had so many times before, as I had watched my comrades being released while I remained behind.

=♦=

When I had arrived in Pechora for the first time in 1941, there was nothing to be seen for miles around, except camps. Now Pechora was a developed city with nice homes and paved streets. The bridge that we built over the Pechora River had already been operational for quite some time now, and trains full of coal from Vorkuta travelled over it as far as Leningrad[65].

The region had grown as a result of the hard labour of innocent 'criminals.' How many such settlements and regions were developed in the Soviet Union every year, and how many thousands of innocent lives were sacrificed to accomplish this task?

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[65] Leningrad: now St. Petersburg

Here in the Pechora *peresylka*, the centre where new prisoners were welcomed and veteran prisoners were released, I accidentally bumped into a *perebezchik* named Zelig Jakobovics from Szaszregen, Transylvania. Zelig said that he knew me from home, although I didn't remember ever having seen him. Before the war, he had lived in Sighet, he said, and he even enlightened me as to where we had first met. Apparently, we had both been members of the new Zionist organization, *B'nei Akiva*, and Zelig remembered hearing me speak at one of the meetings.

Zelig Jakobovics had also wanted to go to Chernovitz or Kishinev upon his release, and just like me, was not given permission to go there. He, too, had chosen Belz. What an unusual coincidence!

Before I left Voyavazh,[66] the camp compound that I was freed from, I received four hundred rubles for my six years of hard labour. It was a paltry sum. Four hundred rubles was precisely the monthly salary of an unskilled labourer in the Soviet Union. I would have received more if my cotton rags hadn't been burned several years earlier when my brigade mates had tried to set me afire. Consequently, a certain amount was deducted for the deficit the Soviet Union had incurred on my account.

Even after an inmate was freed, he still had to remain with prisoners in the Pechora camp. Until he went through all the formalities, such as obtaining train tickets, undergoing disinfection, and getting non-perishable food products for the trip, he was under the control of the *lager* authorities. In other words, although he was not officially a

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[66] This is the first reference made by the author to this particular camp.

prisoner, he had to be together with other prisoners and still have reason to fear the *zhuliks*.

Before I went to take care of all the paperwork, I recalled what I had lived through six years earlier when I had first arrived. I especially remembered the terrible *zhuliks* in this *peresylka*. Now that I had a few hundred rubles – a treasure that I had never possessed before in Russia – I became worried that my wages from the last six years would go up in smoke. I had a hunch that something needed to be done to protect my capital. I figured that my best option would be to hand my money over to the *dezhurnyi* and get a receipt from him. That way I would be able to claim back my few measly rubles when it was time for me to leave the *lager* for good.

Zelig Jakobovics had arrived in the Pechora *peresylka* a little while before I had, but hadn't had the foresight to expect any unpleasantness. He was sure that since he was now a free person, the *zhuliks* would leave him alone. How wrong he was! The inevitable happened much sooner than he could have imagined.

We both lay on bunks in the *peresylka* and tried to rest our weary bodies, when – all of a sudden – we felt our legs being pulled violently. A tall, brawny *zhulik*, accompanied by another goon, no less tough-looking, said to us, "Come on, get out of your bunks. Let's get acquainted!"

We quickly figured out what kind of acquaintance this guy was trying to establish with us, especially when he started to pat our pockets. "If you utter one peep, you carcasses," he threatened, "you'll be carried off to the cemetery instead of being freed!"

No doubt about it, we were doomed. We tried to stand up to them. We were free citizens of the Soviet Union, weren't we? Nothing doing! We immediately got a few blows to our faces and stomachs. The *zhuliks* knew from experience that although they could overcome their victims with fear alone, beating them up was already an ingrained habit; they could succeed more quickly if they landed a few well-placed punches, and then their victim would lose all desire for resistance.

"Come on, hurry up, you stinking prostitutes! You're soon going to be freed, you lucky sons of bitches. You'll have so much money you'll throw it around like garbage, but we have to hang around here for years and years. We can croak before we have another chance to lay our hands on such pretty boys like you. Such important people don't come here every day!"

Jakobovics slowly began to unbutton his jacket. "Get a move on!" they shouted as they pummelled his face. It didn't take long before Jakobovics was cleaned out.

"Now it's your turn!" they barked at me. While they were taking care of Jakobovics, one of them had eyed me like a hawk, so that I wouldn't – God forbid – run away and squeal on them to the *dezhurnyi*. They certainly didn't want both doves to fly the coop.

Believe me, if I could have run, I would have – not for myself, but to spare Jakobovics. But there was no way I could have escaped, because of the third *zhulik* stationed at the door.

I spoke to the *zhuliks* in the same coarse language that they habitually used. (You can't say I hadn't learned anything during all my years of imprisonment…) "If you want

my money," I informed them "then you're welcome to go to the *dezhurnyi* and tell him that I told him to give it to you!"

They looked at me in amazement. If I had smashed my fist into their ugly faces, they couldn't have been more surprised. They didn't believe that I had no money with me. They frisked me and searched my pockets, and ultimately found the *zapiska*, my receipt from the *dezhurnyi*.

"*Vot molodets*! Good for you! What a clever guy you are!" they complimented me and patted me on the back. "*Vot molodets*!" They regretted their loss, but respected me for my foresight. Afterwards, they said goodbye as if we were good friends. They even wished us good luck and a bright future as free citizens. And to me they repeated their somewhat dubious compliment, "*Vot molodets*!"

=♦=

Jakobovics was beside himself. The *zhuliks* had robbed him of his entire remuneration for six years of slave labour. The few hundred rubles that he had managed to acquire had all gone up in smoke. Now all he had left were some dry food products that would last him ten days – and then what?

"It's not such a big deal," I tried to console him. "It would have been much worse if they'd taken what little money I had, too. For the time being, I still have a few hundred rubles, and whatever I eat, you'll eat."

Unfortunately, we quickly discovered that our few hundred rubles had very little value. We were not allowed to purchase products in the *magazin*, the state-run store,

since ration cards were necessary. And on the black market, prices were exorbitant – a piece of bread cost fifty times more than in the *magazin*.

To tell the truth, Jakobovics was my Sancho Panza. I ended up making all the decisions, and he just followed along. The odd time he expressed disagreement with my choices, he would concede immediately, with virtually no argument. Even when faced with events that had major implications on our future, where my decisions boomeranged on us, he never reproached me for my lack of judgement.

"I leave it up to you," he would say, when we were in a predicament. "You'll find out a way to get us out of this jam."

If my way turned out bad, and we fell into a new quandary, instead of blaming me when I truly deserved to be held responsible, he would justify my actions.

"You meant well. It didn't work out, so what can you do?" he would say. That was the kind of person Zelig Jakobovics was.

Once we received our products and the money I had left with the *dezhurnyi*, Jakobovics and I cheerfully went out the *lager* gate, full of hope and optimism. We had received our official release papers. How precious they were to us. These treasured documents signified that we were free at last. Never again would we be under the command of armed soldiers. Never again would we be at the mercy of *zhuliks*. Never again would we be counted twice daily. Never again would we have to march to work in rows. In a word: we were FREE!

Jakobovics was not a stupid man – far from it. He had almost completed his studies in a Romanian high school. For that reason I would often become annoyed with

him for not helping me make plans. Why didn't he use his intellect to solve a problem that could impact our whole future? But he was a Sancho Panza type, and he treated me with respect, as if I knew everything and he knew nothing. Many times when we couldn't decide our best course of action, he would tell me, "You know best what we have to do, so whatever you decide will turn out fine."

We were exactly the same age – in our twenties. He was tall and skinny, almost a head taller than me, and it would have been more appropriate for me to have played the role of Sancho Panza to his Don Quixote. But, as it turned out, it was the other way around.

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From Pechora, we had to walk about ten or fifteen kilometres to Kazhva. At the Kazhva train station we were to get travel passes, which would enable us to proceed farther. It was bitterly cold. In February, that part of the country is always frigid with hurricane-force winds. When I had arrived in Pechora six years earlier, a snowstorm raged. Now, too, there was a blizzard. I was destined to have a storm greet me and a storm bid me farewell from this godforsaken place.

We were free, yet we were homeless. Our *lager* clothes were worn to shreds and hung on us like rags. We were dressed no better than we had been as prisoners. We had no place to go and warm up a little, after having walked several kilometres in the freezing weather. We saw *brigadir*s sitting and warming up beside little fires, while the prisoners in their brigades worked. We were afraid to get close to them because the soldiers guarding the prisoners might think that we belonged to the brigade, and could shoot at us.

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I will never forget how a soldier once shot an innocent Soviet citizen who had inadvertently found himself in the middle of a brigade of prisoners. I was working on the railway line at the time. Mechanics often came to service the locomotives, and would occasionally give us a few cigarettes or a piece of bread. On the day in question, a generous machinist came over to us and handed out some tobacco, and then rushed off to lubricate his machine. A soldier spied him and yelled at him to stop. Perhaps the mechanic didn't hear the order; perhaps he didn't realize that the soldier was addressing him; perhaps he just didn't feel like paying attention to the soldier's command. Whatever the reason for the machinist's disobedience, the soldier shot him in the back. The poor, innocent mechanic collapsed on the ground and died on the spot.

Thus I witnessed, once again, how in the Soviet Union a person's life was of no value – dependent on the whim of an NKVD'ist. (Incidentally, there was a rhyming expression in the *lager*: 'An NKVD'ist is a sadist.')

Upon observing the cruelty of the Soviet soldier towards their hapless colleague, other train workers pulled on the whistle cord of his locomotive. We could hear whistle blast after whistle blast after whistle blast…

The train could not move because it hadn't been serviced. In the meantime, more locomotives arrived, and they were all forced to stop since the first train was still out of commission and in the way. When other mechanics learned the true reason for the delay, one after another they pulled their whistle cords and produced a plaintive, mournful wail. What an eerie sound emanated from those locomotives. That was the only way the

machinists could protest and express their sadness against such a brutal murder. Truly a fitting eulogy for their slain colleague.

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Now that we had survived to experience the happy moment of freedom, Jakobovics and I certainly didn't want to become victims of a trigger-happy soldier. We avoided brigades of prisoners and tried to stay far away from the Soviet convoys.

We walked by some cottages and asked their inhabitants to let us in for a while to warm up, but one after another they chased us away. Finally we arrived at a small hut where there lived a destitute family of former prisoners, and they allowed us entry into their home. They were extremely poor. Their whole abode consisted of one room without furniture or niceties and with bed planks just like in the *lager*. Two dirty, half-naked children were hidden under a collection of rags.

Jakobovics and I were frozen. Our eyebrows were ice-covered and our faces were full of snow. We shook the ice off ourselves and threw off our outerwear, but we were so chilled, we could hardly warm up. We were so thankful to the woman who had let us in, that we fished into our sacks containing provisions for our journey, and gave the children each a ruble and a whole herring. The children's faces lit up when they saw an entire herring in their hands. They gobbled down the herring without bread, as if it were a delicacy. Within seconds it was gone.

As we watched the little ones wolf down the herring, we realized how each region, large and small, has its own peculiar creatures, with their own unusual habits. Even after having spent so many years in jails and in *lagers*, we could not accept the fact that fish

could be enjoyed without bread. With wonder we watched how, here in Pechora, those children could take such pleasure in eating salted herring all by itself.

It occurred to me afterwards that such people need to harden themselves to the vagaries of life – otherwise they would never be able to survive.

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After much difficulty, we finally made it to the Kazhva station. Actually, it looked more like a barrack than a train station. It was unheated, and we would have to wait in the freezing cold for a few hours until the train arrived. But at least we were sheltered from the wind.

All kinds of people were there, going in many different directions. This was the first time I came to realize that in the Soviet Union even free citizens were terrorized by *zhuliks*. We had to watch out for them at all times, just like in the *lager*. Every minute we would hear some distraught person running around, crying that he had been robbed. One after another, travellers would complain about the disappearance of a valise, a package or a wallet. They all knew that they had to be ever on their guard, but even the wariest of travellers were not immune to the *zhuliks'* treachery. These hooligans used the same methods they had in the camp. Two *zhuliks* would push and shove until one would fall on top of the other, and 'accidentally' bump into a hapless victim, whom they had previously targeted. Before he knew what had hit him, the innocent traveller was relieved of his belongings.

Finally, we were able to board the train, and we began our journey. The following day we were to arrive in Kotlas, and within three days, we would most likely reach Kirov.

The day after that, we were scheduled to travel to Gorky, and from there, we would head to Moscow, where we would ultimately disembark. It was the exact route we had travelled six years before.

Although we journeyed as free men in a passenger train, our provisions were of the same poor quality as when we had gone in the other direction – dry bread and herring. But there was one big difference: this time we had enough water to drink. And of course, most importantly, we felt proud to be in a passenger train among free people. For the first time in so many years, we could move about freely just like everyone else.

At the Kirov station, we bought a glass of milk. We hadn't seen a drop of milk for ages. What a treat it was to be able to enjoy such a delicacy, after so long.

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The train did not follow its schedule as planned. It took us a few extra days, but we did ultimately arrive in Moscow. As a *lagernik* I had often fantasized about spending some time in Moscow as a free citizen. Now my dream had finally come true. I didn't really know what I could achieve in Moscow – there were so many things to see. Now that I was there, I couldn't decide what to do first. Maybe I would go to the then only Yiddish newspaper, the *Einikeit,*[67] and meet some of the big names in Soviet Yiddish literature, such as David Bergelson, Itzik Feffer and Peretz Markish.[68] Perhaps I would go to the Lenin Mausoleum on Red Square and have a look at the Kremlin, Stalin's seat of power, and the source of so much evil towards innocent subjects of the Soviet empire.

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[67] *Einikeit*: Unity
[68] Stalin ordered the murder of these Yiddish writers in 1952.

Or should I attend some entertainment event, like for instance, Yiddish theatre? It would be wonderful to see the great Mikhoels.[69] However, before going anywhere, we had to go to the bathhouse. We'd been sleeping in our clothes for over a week, and were absolutely filthy. First of all we would wash ourselves and freshen up, and afterwards, we would decide what to do.

In the bathhouse, I saw my naked body in the mirror – from head to toe – for the first time since my arrest. It was as if I observed not only my physical nakedness, but also my spiritual decline. I felt as if my whole being had decayed. That vision of my emaciated, gaunt, dried out body made me lose any enthusiasm I might have had about myself. I didn't want to go anywhere after that. What kind of face would I have to show to the Yiddish leaders and writers?

I was sick of Moscow and its attractions – its Kremlin, its mausoleum, its museums and its beautiful subway. I just wanted to get out. Jakobovics and I went to the Moscow station and waited endlessly for a train to Kishinev. There were people there like us who had been hanging around for weeks without being able to procure a ticket. Even if someone did manage to get a ticket, more often than not, he was not let onto the train, for lack of room. To get a place on the train you had to bribe the conductor or the control clerk. People were extremely tense. Terrible incidents took place, because only those with transit tickets were allowed to sleep on the hard benches of the station. All

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[69] S.M Mikhoels was a renowned Jewish actor. On January 13, 1948, he was murdered by members of the Russian Secret Service on a road in Minsk. The corpse was mutilated by a truck in order to feign an accident. Stalin himself gave that order by telephone, according to his daughter Swetlana, who was a coincidental witness.

others were chased away like dogs. Women and their babies had nowhere to sleep. Security policemen patrolled the area constantly and harassed people; they arrested anyone without valid documents. It seemed to Jakobovics and me that the officers badgered us more than anyone else. In our *lager* clothes and our ugly camp faces, we looked like hardened criminals. Indeed, we had been incarcerated for more than twice as long as our original sentence, but the mark of Cain followed us nonetheless, as if we were still guilty of our past crimes.

Our provisions were almost gone. As long as we had enough bread and herring, we could manage somehow. But now it looked as if we would soon have nothing to eat. Before long, my few rubles would run out, and then what would we do so as not to perish from hunger?

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I had a feeling that in Moscow, the capital of Soviet Russia, where many international embassies were located, that I might be able to find out something about our repatriation to Romania or Hungary. If I had known someone in Moscow who could give me advice, and who could tell me where to go, we would have been spared many miseries. But to our misfortune, we were entirely alone, so we had nobody to help us by word or deed. Furthermore, our own instincts had become very dull during our years of imprisonment, so we didn't think things through as well as we should have. By the time we found out what we could have accomplished in Moscow, it was too late, and by then we got embroiled inadvertently in another predicament.

In the meantime, we hung around the Moscow train station. We had already lingered in the waiting area for several days, sleeping on hard benches like the bunks in the *lager*. We were already sick of Moscow, with all its historical sites and venues. We just wanted to reach our destination. Where would we go? Let it be Belz, Kishinev, or Chernovitz – it didn't matter to us where we would ultimately end up. In the camps we had learned all kinds of work, both manual and clerical, so we just wanted to get a chance to work and live like the other tens of millions of inhabitants of Soviet Russia.

We went over to a high ranking-officer at the Moscow train station. I told him that my *tovarishch* and I had just been freed from a camp. I tried to play on his sympathy and mentioned that our provisions were almost all gone, and if we remained at the station for another few days, we would starve to death.

It took only one glance at us for the constable to figure out what the situation was. He examined our documents and took steps to ensure that we leave Moscow as soon as possible. The officer did not rest until he reserved a place for us on the train. We weren't sure whether he meant to help us in our plight, or whether he just wanted to get rid of such unsavoury looking characters hanging around the Moscow terminal, where people from all over the world congregated. One thing we knew for sure: he wanted us gone.

=♦=

We boarded the next train for Belz. When we passed through Kiev, I remembered that Lyova Elgart had asked me to go to his home and give personal regards to his wife and son. But I felt so shabby in my camp rags that I was sure that instead of being a source of pleasure to them, I would have the opposite effect. I figured that once they had

one look at me, they would picture their Lyova looking just as dreadful. Besides, I didn't have permission to disembark and interrupt my journey. The train was only stopped for a short time, and my travel pass allowed for no stopovers. What would happen if I was caught in Kiev without a permit, and where would I get another one?

The train stopped for half an hour in Zhmerinka, a *shtetl* in the Ukraine. A young Jewish passenger suggested that we might be interested in having a look at the architecture of the Zhmerinka station. We got off the train, and observed that the station was indeed different from all others we had seen. It was as round as a huge apple – inside and out.

Afterwards, our travelling companion told us why he had proposed that we check out the building. "This station," the young man told us self-importantly, "was built in tsarist times. The architect was a Jew. Even though it is an amazing and beautiful structure, the Tsar criticized it. He said it looked too much like a yarmulke."

=♦=

At long last, in the middle of the night, we reached our *Shteiteleh Belz*.

We had nobody there, neither friend nor acquaintance; we had no idea whether there were even any Jews left in this town. Before the war, there had been a thriving Jewish community here, but we were only too aware of what had happened to Jewish communities since then.

We slept over at the station. The following morning we knew that our first duty was to report to the NKVD, inform them that we had arrived safely, and have our documents approved. An officer saw us and asked why we had chosen Belz as our

residence. We replied that we were not permitted to go to Chernovitz or Kishinev, the only two larger cities that had been part of Romania before the war, where we might have been able to meet with friends who could eventually help us get established. We asked the officer to give us advice regarding work. We told him that we would take any job we could, if he would only let us know where to go and to whom to apply. He replied that work was not his jurisdiction, and he couldn't give us any advice. He suggested that we go to factories and construction sites, and see if there was any work there.

To our great surprise and disappointment, nobody wanted anything to do with us. We had returned from prison camps, and as such, everyone was afraid of us. Soviet clerks discriminated against us, and none of the *nachalniks* we approached even let us finish telling them what we wanted. They treated us as if we carried such a terrible disease that it would be dangerous to get near us. At one site they chased us out and threatened, "Scram, you whoring sons of bitches, before we break your bones!"

Now we had a new misfortune that we could never have imagined – we couldn't find a job in the Soviet Union, land of the working masses. We had no place to stay, no work and nothing to eat. Our provisions were long gone, as was our last *kopek*. What would happen to us?

We started to ask whether there were any Jews in Belz, and we learned that there were a few dozen Jewish families there.

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We arrived in Bessarabia during a time when there was a terrible famine across the entire region. In 1946, there had been a very severe drought in all of the Ukraine.

Peasants couldn't reap even a meagre harvest from the parched earth, so inhabitants of the countryside had migrated to the cities, assuming that they would find some work to keep body and soul together. Everywhere, the population went hungry, and people collapsed daily of starvation.

Jakobovics and I roamed the Belz streets for hours until late afternoon, whereupon we chanced upon a Jewish person. We were very happy to see him. We greeted him warmly and started to tell him our troubles. The Jew listened to us with a great deal of interest. He didn't chase us away; on the contrary, he joined in and recounted his own problems. There was no way he could help us, he declared, since he was very needy himself. He had recently returned from Soviet Central Asia, where he and his family had fled at the beginning of the war. He had many small children, and spent his days running around searching for livelihood for his household.

"The only advice that I can give you," he told us with a sigh, "is to come to the evening services at the synagogue. There will be more Jews there then, and maybe they can give all three of us a helping hand…"

Not only hadn't we eaten the whole day, we didn't even have a place to go and sit down for a minute. We had already wandered the length and breadth of the shtetl, and were looked upon with mistrust wherever we went.

At last, the Jews assembled at the synagogue. They advised us to approach the *predsedatel obshchiny*, president of the congregation, who happened to be the rabbi as well. This so-called rabbi, or president, listened to us with indifference. He didn't even commiserate with us – he ignored us as if he weren't even there. We soon realized that

we wouldn't get much help from this 'rabbi.' I saw that I had no other choice than to appeal to the whole congregation.

"Gentlemen," I began speaking in a weak and shy voice, "My friend and I have just recently been freed from the Pechora camp. Our destiny has taken us here to Belz. We didn't come with the intention of begging – God forbid – and making it difficult for you. But our tragedy is a real Jewish tragedy. All day we wandered along the streets looking for work. Not only didn't we find work, we couldn't even find anybody willing to speak to us. Nobody wanted to have anything to do with us. They were simply afraid, and they didn't even dare look at us… Since yesterday, we haven't even eaten a piece of dry bread. Maybe you will have pity, and help us with a bit of food and somewhere to sleep…"

My words must have struck a chord, because the results could be seen immediately. One Jew came over and gave us ten rubles, followed by a second and a third. The entire congregation then informed us that that they would let us sleep over at the synagogue. One simple ordinary Jew, who had probably not wanted to usurp the 'rabbi's' authority at first, but later appeared to reproach him for his insensitivity, went over to the pulpit, and clapped to get everyone's attention.

"These poor, suffering people," he addressed the crowd, "are victims of Jewish destruction. How can we let them go without anything? How can we ignore them?"

Chapter 41 - The Holiest of My Heart

The NKVD in Pechora had forbidden us to obtain a permit to reside in large cities like Chernovitz or Kishinev, but the local Belz NKVD appeared to be unaware of any such restrictions. If we could not get work in Belz, we were told, we could go to Kishinev without any problems. As a matter of fact, there were many people like us with foreign citizen status in Kishinev, and they were permitted to live and work there.

So Jakobovics and I packed up and headed to Kishinev. My first act should have been to call on Haïm Fishman's home, and give personal regards to his wife and his parents. But something held me back.

"I'll go another time," I thought, "when I have a chance…"

Haïm had given me letters for his wife and his parents, and I had promised that I would do my best to deliver them. He gave me permission to read their contents, but on principle, I didn't want to open them. I knew that his family would be very happy to get first hand news about him, yet I wasn't in a hurry to go there. I did, however, pay a visit to Yefim Spack's parents. Needless to say, they were delighted to see me. They didn't know how to express their thanks for my efforts.

Yefim's mother dabbed her eyes when she spoke about her son. That was when I found out exactly why Yefim had been sentenced. It was because of the derogatory joke about *Kol Nidre* and *kolkhoz*.

Yefim's father was an engineer by profession, and he and his wife were fairly well off. Mr. Spack was even planning to fly to Pechora to see his son. They asked me if I could give them some information about visits from family members. Did I think he would get a permit from the NKVD to see Yefim? I told Mr. Spack all I could about similar situations. I certainly didn't want to discourage him, although I knew how much effort and money such a trip would involve. I knew what kind of joy a prisoner would experience if he could see his family. It would boost Yefim's morale tremendously to know that he was not forgotten. Also, his prestige among the other prisoners would be enhanced, once they saw how much he was valued.

Jakobovics and I asked Mr. Spack where we could find employment. He asked us if we were willing to do construction work.

"Ha! You ask whether we want to work? Of course we do!"

"I'm an engineer at a construction site," Mr. Spack said, "and if you are really willing to do that kind of work, then come and see me at the beginning of next week."

If the first group of Jews that we had met as free men – in Belz – had initially treated us with indifference and had made a bad first impression, the Kishinev Jews showed us more warmth. They were friendly and had sympathy for us.

In principle, I was always against begging. I hadn't wanted to accept help from the Belz Jews, even though my need was great. But I simply didn't have any other choice.

Now, too, I wouldn't have gone to the Jewish community for help if I could have managed otherwise. I was helpless enough on my own, but since I was with Jakobovics, we were doubly needy, and necessity breaks iron. In a matter of life or death, following my principles would have been worse than deviating from them.

We applied to Rabbi Applebaum, head rabbi of Kishinev. When he heard where we had come from, he immediately wanted to find out more about our predicament. The first thing he did was to arrange for us to sleep in the shul. He also requested that Reb Yekhiel, an altruistic member of the Kishinev community, give us as much help as possible. Mr. Yekhiel gave us a few hundred rubles and some bread.

Since there was a great famine in the Ukraine, the Kishinev community had enough trouble taking care of their own poor. Many Kishinev Jews came back after the war crippled and impoverished. A lot of them were in great need and it was impossible to take care of everybody.

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After a while, I decided that it was time for me to find Haïm Fishman's wife and parents and give them his letters and personal regards. As soon as Haïm's parents read their son's letter, they began to behave very warmly towards me. Spack's parents had also treated us well, but we had sensed that after our first visit they really didn't want to have much more to do with us. At the Fishman's, on the other hand, things were entirely different. They invited us over often. They were especially hospitable towards me, and no matter how often they saw me, they gave me plenty to eat. At a time when most people in the area were going hungry, they honoured me with large portions. I must

admit that I went over there more than once just for the food. The Fishmans helped me in other ways, too. They gave me a suit as well as some underwear. I was truly grateful for their generosity.

The Fishmans had a daughter in her twenties, by the name of Clara. She was a good-looking, intelligent girl with pleasant manners. A girl like that never has trouble finding a match. She surely had no reason to fall in love with someone like me – a manual labourer – who had just recently been released from prison camp. Indeed, she did not appear particularly attracted to me at the beginning, but her parents liked me a lot, and they probably encouraged her to be nice to me. I didn't fall in love with her since I was only interested in *B*'s whereabouts – if she was alive. Nobody else mattered, as far as I was concerned.

If I had read Haïm's letter to his parents, I would have understood what was going on. Haïm had praised me a lot and wrote that he wouldn't mind if I were to become his brother-in-law. The Fishmans were influenced by what he had written, and encouraged a relationship between Clara and me.

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Haïm's wife, Hannah, walked around carrying around a baby boy. Hannah wept when I told her about Haïm's anguish at not being able to see his own flesh and blood.

"What I didn't do for his freedom," she lamented. "I went to Moscow with a small child in my arms. It took me two weeks to get an audience with President Shvernik himself. Shvernik listened to me with pity and even consoled me. He promised he would personally do whatever he could so Haïm could be freed. In the meantime it's been

almost two years since his arrest, and I'm waiting for salvation that doesn't come. He's innocent and yet he's sentenced for six years!"

Upon seeing his mother weep, the baby started to wail. The poor fatherless child and cried until he was totally exhausted. His mother took him into another room and tried to put him to sleep. I heard her sing him a lullaby reminiscent of their plight.

See the dark clouds race and rush
Hear the wind whistle and blow –
Far off in Siberia
Your father had to go.

Your father sends his greetings
To his darling only child;
So go to sleep my darling,
Go to sleep my child.

The wind sends you a greeting
From that cold and dreary land;
There your father is standing,
A shovel in his hand.

Deeper and deeper he digs

He shovels the earth and cries;

Do not worry, my darling,

He digs graves for all lies.

Neither the first nor the last

To fall in the field is he;

But do not worry my child,

A great hero fathered thee.

You, too, will be a hero.

But now it is time to sleep;

Gather strength for the future,

My only child – don't weep![70]

Having recently been in Moscow, I could imagine what difficulties the poor woman had had to endure with a small child in her arms.

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Clara must have noticed that I was not particularly affectionate towards her, so she was rather cool to me as well. Nevertheless, I would invite her once in a while to the theatre or to a dance or to some sort of entertainment.

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[70] *S'loyfn, s'yogn shvartse volkn* by Hersh D. Nomberg (1876-1927). Loosely translated by Eva Basch. (A more literal translation can be found in Pearls of Yiddish Song, ed Joseph Mlotek and Eleanor Mlotek, 1988.)

Everything would have been perfect if she had been *B*, and not Clara. It was hard for me to give up some of the pleasures of life after having imprisoned so long in the camps. My conscience did plague me somewhat, because I would often speculate, *I could get involved with this Clara! I could fall in love with her, and then I would have done one of the most horrible things in the world. I would have betrayed the holiest of my heart – my love to B...*

=♦=

"I must write to Shlome Wieder," I thought. "He's been free for quite a while already; maybe he's found out where *B* is..."

I had already written to all my brothers and sisters abroad. I had even sent a note the community of Sighet and asked about *B* and the rest of my family, but I hadn't received an answer yet. Shlome Wieder lived in the central part of Soviet Russia (the Carpathians were annexed by the Russians after the war) so with a bit of luck, it would not be long before I would receive an answer from him.

Sure enough, within two weeks, I heard back from Shlome. He informed me that *B* was alive! Apparently, Leah'ke, Herschel Pollock's widow, had also gone home to Rakhov, where he himself was now living. Leah'ke had spent her entire imprisonment together with *B* and she had found out *B*'s address. Apparently, *B* was now living in Aktyubinsk, Kazakhstan. Shlome had sent her my address in Pechora only a few weeks earlier.

Shlome sent me regards from Leah'ke. He advised me that she had suggested that I go find *B* in Aktyubinsk.

He praised Leah'ke in his letter and raved about what a nice girl she was. He expressed his happiness at having met her. It looked like there was something going on between the two of them…

B had been released from the camp two months before me and had found out about my fate before I learned about hers. She learned from Leah'ke, via Shlome Wieder, that I was in Pechora. As soon as *B* learned of my whereabouts, she wrote letters and sent telegrams one after another, but of course she didn't receive any answer, because by then I had already left the camp. She almost went to Pechora – a distance of some thousands of kilometres – to find me. If I had had been released a few days later, I would have found out where she was and then I would have requested to be sent to Kazakhstan instead of Bessarabia. It looked as if *B* was destined to stay apart from me for a while longer. By the time I found out where she was, I was already in Kishinev, and had almost got involved with someone else. And my misfortunes were far from over…

As soon as I learned that *B* was alive, I told the Fishmans the whole truth about my relationship with her. I never crossed the threshold of their house after that.

I immediately wrote a heartfelt letter to *B*. I confided in her that my feelings had not changed. I promised that I would do everything in my power to get together with her, and encouraged her to do likewise. We had to do our utmost to untangle ourselves from the net we were enmeshed in and find a way to get home.

Chapter 42 - Take My Advice

We had many difficulties at the construction site. It looked like we wouldn't get paid for another month and a half. Ration cards were issued on the first of the month only, and we had started in the middle of the month. We would therefore have to wait an extra month before being registered in a government *magazin* to buy rationed products at government prices. Money we didn't receive; savings we didn't have, supplies we also didn't get, but work we had – above our strength, because the daily norm had to be filled regardless. How would we ever feed ourselves?

Nor was lodging a simple matter. We had to wait weeks before obtaining a permit to sleep in an *obshchezhitie*, a mass sleeping area in a rooming house. With great effort we finally managed to get a bed, and then we found out what it meant to sleep in an *obshchezhitie*! There were as many pesky lice swarming about in each mattress as ants in an anthill.

The rooming house lodged over a hundred people. Every morning, after we headed off to work, the caretaker would just place clean sheets on top of the beds, instead of airing out the mattresses and linens. If ever a commission came during the daytime to inspect the premises, all they would see was the bedcovers; they would assume everything

was in order, and not realize what was under the clean sheets. We who slept there knew very well what lurked beneath.

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Across the street from where I worked, situated on a little hill, was a concentration camp for German prisoners of war. As we worked, we had a good view of the camp. We could hear the music that the prisoners played and could also watch what they were doing.

From the first minute that I saw the German POWs, it was my impression that they enjoyed better living conditions in the concentration camps than ordinary Russian prisoners in Soviet jails. Their clothes, consisting mainly of German military uniforms, were clean and orderly. Why did German POW's – of all people! – deserve greater privileges than Russian prisoners? I assumed that it was because the Soviet Union belonged to the International Red Cross, and as such, had to follow certain regulations. It distressed me greatly to observe such humane treatment accorded to Nazi war prisoners.

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We were faced with many difficulties. We worked hard, yet received no pay. Without pay, we couldn't buy food. There were times when we had a more difficult time now than when we were convicts, because at least in the camps, we got a daily *payok* to keep us alive. Now we had to fend for ourselves. Nobody cared whether we had a kopek to our name to buy a bit of bread, or whether we starved to death. We had no choice; we would have to wait six weeks before seeing our first ruble, or obtaining permission to shop at the *magazin*. Until then, we had to survive any way we could.

Even those who did receive wages and were allowed to buy products in the government *magazin*, got very little. The ration was very small. Many could hardly make their earnings stretch for much more than two or three weeks. Where could they find enough to feed and take care of themselves and their families the rest of the month? People who had some savings could buy merchandise on the black market. Jakobovics and I, who had miraculously survived the *lager* with only the clothes on our backs, had no money and certainly no provisions saved up. So, whether we wanted to or not, we had no other choice than to apply for support from the Kishinev Jewish community.

We weren't the only ones asking for help. It happened to be before Passover, and members of the Kishinev congregation were handing out *Ma'ut Khitim*, Passover provisions for the poor. Many indigent souls came to the *shul* for help. There was a great commotion. Some parishioners were not satisfied with the little assistance they received, and they accused the community leaders of pocketing funds designated for the poor. Others threatened to eat *khametz* on Passover if they didn't get enough *Ma'ut Khitim* money. The community leaders were well aware that most of these complainers were not really that needy, so they just let them shout.

Jakobovics and I felt very awkward among these beggars. We were uncomfortable requesting handouts from the community pot, but necessity breaks iron. We had no choice other than to stand in the queue and wait. We didn't push in line like many others were doing. On the contrary, if people wanted to get ahead of us, we just let them go first. As far as we were concerned, it they were in such a rush to plead their case – they were free to do so. We stood in the back, shy and withdrawn. We didn't care if

we turned out to be the very last to receive anything, but in the meantime, our friend, Reb Yekhiel, noticed us. He was one of the main leaders of the community and in charge of the *Ma'ut Khitim* committee. Reb Yekhiel called us aside and whispered, "You don't have to stay in line. Don't worry. You're both first on the list of the needy, even though you're not making a big hullabaloo about it."

This Reb Yekhiel was an anonymous donor. It happened more than once that he pulled us out of the mud when we were sure we were doomed. He would give us some food and money when nobody was looking. If it hadn't been for such 'Reb Yekhiel's,' many indigent Jews would have perished.

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In the crowd there was a woman wrapped in a shawl, whose age we couldn't determine. It was hard to tell if she was young or, in fact, very, very old. She tried to speak, but her words came out all garbled, so nobody could understand who she was and what she wanted. She spoke a sort of pidgin Russian with a mixture of German-Yiddish in a strong Hungarian accent. The community leaders thought that the poor woman was mentally unbalanced. Since there was a big crowd to take care of and it was getting late, they just wanted to get rid of her. Then Reb Yekhiel went over to her, and asked her what language would be the easiest for her to express herself. She answered that the only language she knew was Hungarian.

"Well, here are two Hungarian young men," Yekhiel pointed to Jakobovics and me. "You can tell them what you want."

The woman began to relate her story. She had recently come to Kishinev by chance. She had no friends or acquaintances – not even one person with whom she could communicate. She confided in us that she and her husband had escaped from Hungary to Russia before the war, together with their three-year-old son. And now, after six-and-a-half years, she had no idea where her husband or her child could possibly be.

We listened to her very carefully. Somehow, her story sounded familiar.

"What's your husband's name?" we both asked at once.

"Bernat Berkovics."

I felt as if a bomb had been dropped on my head. When I had first heard Bernat Berkovics recount the sad tale of his wife and child, I had felt that his must be one of the most tragic *perebezchik* stories. That was when he was still alive. Now I saw his wife who had, not so long ago, been a vibrant, young woman. Oh my! How she had changed.

Jakobovics and I looked at each other. During all the years we had spent in the camps, Jakobovics and I had never been in the same work area at the same time. We had just met coincidentally as we were being freed in Pechora. Consequently, I had no idea that Jakobovics had actually done time together with Berkovics.

Jakobovics whispered to me in Yiddish that he had happened to be in the hospital with Berkovics as he was dying. Indeed, Berkovics had passed away in his arms.

Poor Fanny. She had no idea that she was now a widow.

Afterwards, we recounted this woman's tragic story to Reb Yekhiel. We noticed that he went off to a corner of the room and dabbed his eyes…

Chronologically, Fanny Berkovics was quite a young woman, but she reminded me of a wizened, frail old crone. I couldn't remember exactly what she had looked like six-and-a-half-years earlier when I had met her by chance in the boxcar on our way from Nadvornaya to Stanislav. But I did recall that she had been a young woman in her twenties, or at most, early thirties. Anyway, few can age so much in six-and-a-half years, unless they had lived through unspeakable horrors. Fanny, it would appear, was one of those survivors.

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As we chatted with Fanny, we found out important details about how we might go home via normal and legal channels.

"While I was in the hospital," she told us, "I met some acquaintances from the camp. From them I found out that if we go to Moscow, we should apply to the Hungarian consulate, and ask to be repatriated back to Hungary. That way we'll be able to get a Hungarian visa without any problem…"

Jakobovics and I listened to her with amazement. "Are you sure?"

"A hundred percent."

She then told us that she only wished "that I should meet some people who would understand me and have pity on me, and help me in my need. All I need is money to pay for a train ticket to Moscow, and a loaf of bread that could last me for a few days so I won't faint from hunger, until I reach the Hungarian consulate. And with this I'm sure I'll reach my objective."

"How can you apply to the Hungarian consulate," we wondered, "since you're from Grosswardein? Grosswardein belongs to Romania again, so aren't you considered a Romanian now?"

"It's true that Grosswardein belongs to Romania *now*," she answered us with conviction, "but we came here at the end of 1940, and at that time Grosswardein was part of Hungary. I even got freed from the camp as a Hungarian citizen. So I'm under Hungarian jurisdiction when it comes to repatriation… On my release papers they even mentioned that I am a Hungarian citizen."

Despite her tragic situation, this woman must have known what she was talking about. We figured that she must be right.

Fanny looked at both of us, and she saw how stunned we were by her words. If what she said was true, we now realized what we could have done when we were in Moscow – if we'd had additional information and a little more wisdom. Fanny, unlike us, still had her release papers from the camp, since she hadn't yet applied to the NKVD for a residence permit. But it was too late for us. We had gone to the NKVD in Kishinev, and they took away our papers and gave us other documents instead, which indicated that we were Romanian citizens.

"Maybe we can try to ask the NKVD to give us back our papers," we tried to console ourselves. "The woman captain, the *kapitansha*, who has the authority over the foreign citizens in Kishinev seemed like a nice woman. We could ask her to return these papers. It's worth a try."

Fanny Berkovics also gave me firsthand news about *B*. Fanny related what *B* had lived through in the camps, as she had tried to maintain her honour and integrity. *B* hadn't wanted to submit to the *nachalniks'* advances, and was therefore harassed and harshly punished. As a rule, women who had run away from Hungary, Romania and other regions had to suffer terrible hardships if they refused to succumb to the *nachalniks* and the *brigadir*s. Some could not withstand the temptation, and they fell into the abyss. A girl from Sighet had borne a child in the camp, and she was plagued by much hardship afterwards[71].

If I hadn't learned earlier about *B*'s whereabouts from Shlome Wieder, I would have found out now from Fanny.

"Everything would be fine," Fanny suddenly cried bitterly, "if I could only find out where my husband and child are."

Fanny advised me to write a letter to *B* immediately, advising her to go to Moscow as soon as possible and apply to the Hungarian consulate. *The Hungarian consulate*, not the Romanian. She advised Jakobovics and me to do likewise, and she was sure that our repatriation would be successful.

I hadn't received any answer yet from my first letter to *B*. I had no idea whether she was still residing at the address I was given by Shlome Wieder. Fanny agreed to keep us updated regarding her repatriation. Since she was going to go to Moscow anyway, she would let us know once she had managed to obtain a visa from the Hungarian consulate

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[71] Translator's note: The child was brutally murdered in front of its mother, days after its birth.

to travel to Hungary. Then she would give us more precise instructions so we could try to follow in her footsteps.

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After a while, Reb Yekhiel came up to us, and took us aside.

"Since you both know that Mrs. Berkovics's husband died," he told us, "it would be fitting that you should tell her. Otherwise, she will be condemned to be an *aguna*, a deserted wife, the rest of her life."

Rabbi Applebaum, the main rabbi of Kishinev, requested, according to his authority as rabbi, that we tell Mrs. Berkovics the truth in his presence – that she was a widow, so that he could give her the sanction to marry again.

Fanny was somewhat apprehensive about our request to have her meet with the Kishinev rabbi. When we got there, Rabbi Applebaum got it over with quickly. He told Fanny, "Here are two witnesses: One is an eye-witness, and the second was informed by a third party, that your husband, Mr. Berkovics, died in the Pechora camp. It is therefore my painful duty to inform you about this sad news. I hereby discharge you from living as an *aguna*, and give you permission to marry again. May we all be released from bereavement forever, and may the Almighty wipe the tears from every person's face. Amen."

Fanny could not follow everything the Rabbi had said, but she surmised from his words that she was a widow. In her despair, she added, as she wiped the tears from her eyes, "I will never be happy ever again, and I will never remarry …"

Fanny now knew that her husband had passed away several years before, but what had happened to her son? She planned, upon her arrival in Moscow, to follow the trail of her missing child. Perhaps she could take her first formal steps in this case through the Hungarian consulate. She hoped that she would find out something through official intervention.

Reb Yekhiel gave Fanny enough money and food to make it to Moscow and take care of her affairs. Jakobovics and I accompanied her to the train. We said our farewells, and reminded her not to forget to write to us, and let us know when and if she succeeded in getting her Hungarian visa.

Within ten days we received a letter from Fanny. She thanked us profusely for the help we had given her in Kishinev. If not for us, she wrote, nobody would have been able to understand her, and help her out. Her big news, she added, was that she had already received her visa. The Hungarian consulate even provided her with train tickets and provisions for her journey to Hungary. She advised us not to delay, and to follow her example.

As for her child, unfortunately, she had no information. She wrote that she would have to go home, because it appeared as if her attempts at finding him were fruitless. The consul advised her to abandon her efforts for the moment. If she was too persistent, he warned, she might not be able to leave Russia at all, and might never be able to find out her son's whereabouts. It might be easier to get news from abroad than from within the country, he suggested.

When we finished reading Fanny Berkovics's letter, we immediately decided to go to the *kapitansha* who looked after the foreign citizens residing in Kishinev. We would ask her to give us back the papers we had handed over to her when we first arrived there.

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I still hadn't received any mail. My brothers and sisters in America hadn't replied to the letters I had written after my release. Nor did I get any letters from *B* or from Sighet. Just my luck – *B* had moved to another address just before I had tried to get in touch with her, so she hadn't received my letters yet. By the time I would finally receive answers to my letters, I would again be surrounded by barbed wire.

Here is what happened:

Jakobovics and I went to *Avir*, the department of foreign citizens. We asked to see the *kapitansha*, the head administrator of the registration office. We explained our reasons for wanting our release papers. We told her about the difficulties we were having in settling in Russia. Everyone eyed us with suspicion, as if we were shady characters, and so it was becoming increasingly difficult to establish ourselves here. We were unable to get work according to our abilities and could barely earn enough to buy a dry piece of bread. We implored her to be kind enough to give us back our papers so we could go home.

To our astonishment, she didn't appear impatient with our request. On the contrary, she appeared very understanding. We assumed that she had taken pity on us and wanted to help us extricate ourselves from our bitter situation. She only requested one little thing – that we bring a permission slip from our *nachalnik*, stating that he agreed to

give us leave from work. We expressed our sincere appreciation to the *kapitansha*, and hurried off to our work site.

It's not easy to get permission from a Soviet *nachalnik* to leave one's job, but we explained that it was necessary for our repatriation. The *nachalnik* was hesitant to grant us this leave of his own authority in the middle of the day, although he knew that we were getting zilch for our labours. But ultimately, when we handed him the permission slip to fill out, he obliged us with his signature.

When the *kapitansha* saw the document signed by our *nachalnik*, she gave us our release papers without further ado. At that moment, I was so happy, I just wanted to take her in my arms and give her a big kiss. Wow! Within a few days we would be able to leave Soviet Russia, just like Fanny Berkovics.

Although I hadn't yet received an answer from *B*, I immediately sent her a telegram, advising her to travel to Moscow, and follow the procedures recommended by Fanny. Hopefully *B* and I would meet in Moscow.

Jakobovics and I had already said goodbye to the *kapitansha*, and were on our way out, when she called us back. "I have some advice for you," she said pleasantly. "Why should you have to go to the trouble of traveling all the way to Moscow to get repatriated through the Hungarian consulate? Listen to me: Go to the *nachalnik* of the *porgranichnaya okhrana*, the border watch. That *nachalnik* is a good friend of mine. Tell him that I sent you. He will advise you about what to do…"

She gave us the exact address of the *nachalnik*. We thanked her again for her thoughtfulness, and we left.

At first, we paid no attention to her suggestion about going to the *porgranichnaya okhrana*. After all, we had already made plans to go to Moscow. I had even sent *B* a telegram to that effect. Then Jakobovics and I reconsidered. We figured that perhaps it wouldn't be such a bad idea to listen to the *kapitansha*'s advice, and go see her 'good friend' the *nachalnik* of the border watch. It couldn't hurt to hear what he had to say…

=♦=

To travel to Moscow would have been quite expensive, and Jakobovics and I certainly didn't have the wherewithal to pay for the trip. We would have had to apply to the Jewish community for help. We didn't like the idea of making plans that required someone else to shell out big money on our account. It was Friday, May 13, 1947. I will never in my life forget that fateful day! As a rule, I'm not a superstitious person, and I don't believe that Friday the 13th is unlucky, but this particular Friday the 13th turned out to be especially disastrous for us.

It was a beautiful spring day. The Kishinev streets were bright and sunny. A light wind carried a lovely fragrance of acacia and lilacs. It was fitting that we had received our release papers on such a delightful day. Spring was bringing with it our salvation, our freedom. We walked in high spirits and laughed aloud as we set out towards our destination. Unfortunately our joy was short lived, as we were reminded once again of the extensive devastation in Kishinev from the war. Some streets were wiped out altogether, with only little grave-like mounds remaining. On one street there was only a wall of a building left. It looked like a large monument to a whole Jewish street. Before

the war, Kishinev had been an important Jewish city, with a population of over fifty thousand Jews, among a general population of two hundred thousand.

Here and there, we saw destroyed *shuls*. One synagogue was entirely gutted. All that remained was a section of its wall inscribed with the Ten Commandments, like a reminder of the destruction of the Holy Temple. No matter how many times I saw this wall, I just wanted to stop and recite Bialik's poem, *Al Sof Beit Hamidrash.*[72] I was especially reminded of the stanza, *Should I weep at your destruction or my destruction, or should I wail and lament at the destruction of us both?* It was as if the destroyed Ten Commandments were reclaiming their debt from the world, displaying their shame openly, and remonstrating, *Behold! Look at what you have done to us!* Every step reminded us of the devastation of Europe, and especially of the Jewish Holocaust. A Jewish city like Kishinev was now destroyed and ravaged. Only a handful of Jews now lived in what had once been a vibrant and thriving Jewish city.

Yet we wanted to dream that, despite everything, a new life would now begin for us.

We let our imaginations run away with us. With these pleasant thoughts of our repatriation, we arrived at a beautiful building that exhibited no signs of damage. The building belonged to the border watch division. We arrived there as free men, but by the time we left we were guarded by an armed soldier in the manner of the NKVD.

Here is what happened:

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[72] On the End of the Temple

We entered the beautiful edifice and presented ourselves to the *nachalnik* of the border watch. He told us to wait in the corridor. We remained there for about half an hour, when, all of a sudden, a soldier with a rifle on his shoulder shouted, "*Idite za mnoy*! Come with me!"

Jakobovics and I both let out a terrible scream, "What's happening?"

To our question came an answer from the *nachalnik* himself, who poked his big ugly face through the door, and calmly told us, "Don't be afraid; go with the soldier."

If we had no cause for alarm, why then did the soldier have to be armed? Jakobovics and I looked at each other and didn't have to say a word to know that we had fallen into another trap.

The soldier led us in the direction of our former worksite – the exact place where we had worked the day before, and where only a few hours earlier we had received permission from the *nachalnik* to leave our job.

As we went past our ex-work place, the bookkeeper came over to us. He was a kind, intelligent Russian man. As soon as he saw that we were being led like slaves, he was very moved. He rubbed his eyes to be sure that it was indeed us. We were embarrassed and turned our faces away. This did not stop the bookkeeper from approaching the soldier and imploring him, "Where are you taking those poor people? What do you have to –?"

"Shut your trap!" the soldier interrupted and shouted. "If you talk too much, I'll arrest you too."

The soldier went over to the watchtower of the POW camp. He handed over our papers from Pechora together with a *zapiska*, an additional document, presumably a detention order. We were right across the street from the construction site where we had worked only the day before. We had become war prisoners in a detention centre – together with former Nazis.

Chapter 43 - Jewish Nazis

In the Soviet Union, we had learned that anything could happen, no matter how bizarre. But that we should become Nazis – this we could never have expected! It looked as if everything was possible here. If the Russkies said we were Nazis, then we must be Nazis.

Luckily for me, I wasn't alone in this mess. At least I had a partner, Jakobovics, who was also a Jewish Nazi, just like me.

I had never been so angry with myself. What stupidity to have gone to the *nachalnik* of the Moldavian border watch to seek advice. Furious as I was with myself, I was even angrier at my Sancho Panza, Jakobovics. I almost didn't want to speak to him. He should at least have blamed me. Or hurled insults at me. But no! He didn't say a word for the longest time. And when he finally deigned to speak, instead of cursing or attacking me for my great and heroic accomplishment, he showered me with compliments.

"You were right about us getting our release papers from the *kapitansha*," Jakobovics told me. "How could you have known," he added sympathetically, "that she would do us a favour on one hand and betray us on the other?"

Jakobovics even had a good word for (guess who!) the *kapitansha*.

"You know what I think," he told me after a long deliberation. "It's quite possible that even the *kapitansha* herself didn't know that the *nachalnik* of the border watch would arrest us. It could be that she seriously thought that she was helping us with our repatriation."

Unlike Jakobovics, I had immediately realized that we had made a huge mistake in seeking freedom from someone whose objective was enslavement. When I was a small boy, I had learned in Torah class why the High Priest in ancient Palestine was forbidden to wear gold clothes when he entered the Holy of Holies to pray on behalf of the Israelites. Gold would remind the Almighty of the sin of the Golden Calf, and a prosecuting angel cannot become transformed into a defending angel. Thus, how could we expect a *nachalnik*, whose function it was to stop anyone from crossing the border, to miraculously be transformed into an ally who would help us cross that very border? And how could we, slaves, expect to be transformed into free men?

Jakobovics could find merit even in the *kapitansha*. As naïve as Jakobovics was – I was not. Not for one minute did I think after our arrest that she hadn't known beforehand that the *nachalnik* of the border watch would throw us into prison. Even if I had believed at the beginning that she might have wanted to help us, I was subsequently divested of that illusion. She most likely had a change of heart after having returned our release papers from the Pechora camp. I suspected that she was afraid of suffering negative consequences for having done so, and that was doubtless why she steered us wrong.

Once we arrived in the camp of German war prisoners, we felt as if this couldn't be happening to us – it must be a horrible nightmare; we must be in the *olam ha'tohu*, the netherworld. It didn't take long, however, for us to realize that we were indeed awake. A German officer, commandant of the camp, came over to us and asked, "*Sprechen Zie Deutch*?"

Those three simple words pierced me to the depths of my being. I felt like grabbing that devil and hurling him to the ground so hard that he would join his Fürher; I almost poured out my bitter heart on this German, whose race had been the cause of all our Jewish suffering. But I held myself back, because I had been arrested not by the Germans, but by the Russians. I forced myself to answer his question, and replied in Russian, "We speak Yiddish and Russian."

"So, you understand German," the commandant retorted in the same official manner.

Thus we learned that we were under German command, and we'd have to get used to our new situation. Nothing would help us now.

The whole atmosphere of a German prison of war camp disgusted us. What in God's name were we doing here? How could such a thing be happening to us?

The German commandant informed us that we would be assigned to a brigade in the morning, and that we would have to start work immediately.

Again we had to hold ourselves back from pouring out our bitter hearts against this German commandant, who ordered us around as if he was our boss. But then I realized, "This German commander is fulfilling the wishes of the Russian *nachalniks*."

Throughout my entire incarceration, I had always been under the impression that most of the prisoners detained in Soviet jails and camps were innocent. However, I had no doubt about the guilt of these German prisoners of war. "They are in the right place," I thought. "I like them much better here… But God in heaven, what are Jakobovics and I doing here?"

"Zelig," I told Jakobovics. "I have decided to go on strike. I won't accept any food, and I will refuse to work together with German prisoners of war. According to Soviet law I have no right to refuse to work, but going on strike might make the Soviet camp authorities pay attention to our situation."

No matter what I said or did, Jakobovics did the same. He could have spared himself plenty of trouble if he had gone his own way. But he stuck together with me just as if we had been Siamese twins.

=♦=

We slept the first night in our new quarters. Or rather, we lay on one four-man bunk, with two other Germans. We couldn't sleep; we only thrashed about like wounded creatures. No matter how much I tried to keep my distance from the Germans who were lying next to me, they just kept encroaching on my space and pushing closer to me. It was utterly loathsome to lie near a German! The Holocaust was still so recent, so fresh in my mind. How could I be sure that the same man, whose cursed body was now lying next to me, had not killed my beloved parents?

Who knew how many innocent Jewish lives this German had murdered? And now I had to lie near him and be subjected to the same conditions as he was.

In the morning, when I was given my food ration, I declined to accept it. I also refused to go to work. Although I hadn't directed him to, Jakobovics did likewise.

Just as I had planned, my actions were brought to the attention of the Soviet authorities. The *nachalnik* of the camp called us and remonstrated, "What kind of capitalistic acts do you want to carry out in my camp?" The *nachalnik*, a major by rank, trembled with fury. "Here, in Soviet Russia, nobody goes on strike. Because you have broken camp discipline, I sentence you to ten days of *kartzer*!"

I knew that I wouldn't get merely a slap on the wrist for going on strike. I fully expected to be put in isolation. I didn't care what punishment was meted out to me, because I knew that this was the only way to bring attention to us. Moreover, I did not sit idly in isolation with folded hands, waiting for a miracle. No! I made a fuss. I went on strike; I refused all food and kept on throwing *zayavlenies*, requests to the *nachalnik*. I poured out my bitter heart and protested against the terrible injustice that we Jews were forced to endure, being thrown together with Nazis.

"…How could I know," I wrote to the *nachalnik*, "if he is not the one responsible for the murder of my father and mother? Did not the Jews and the Russians suffer the most, more than other nationalities in the last war, from these very Germans? I appeal to you to look into my situation, and help me extricate myself from this mix-up…"

I had to write in Russian, in my own name only, because prisoners had no right to plead on behalf of others. Jakobovics wanted to copy everything I had written, but I talked him out of it.

"You don't need to do it," I told him. "My fate is your fate; where I will sleep, you will sleep. What will happen to me will happen to you. At this point in time, we are as close as two peas in a pod."

It ended up that we did not sit for ten days in isolation. Apparently the *nachalnik* was quite moved by our ordeal, because he shortened our ten-day sentence by more than half. He called us in and asked what we wanted. I replied to his query by posing a simple question of my own, "Why were we sent here?"

"I really don't know," he replied in a strange, almost hopeless tone of voice. "Why indeed were you sent here?"

It didn't take long for the *nachalnik* to regain his composure, and he answered authoritatively, like the military man he was, "I didn't bring you this camp, but since you are here, behave yourself properly, and later I will see what I can do."

All in all, we thought that he was quite understanding about the whole thing. He expressed his consideration by changing our duties. Instead of sending us to work in a brigade under a German *brigadir*, he made us *brigadir*s and promised that he would personally try to effect our release.

=♦=

Our freedom in Soviet Russia had been very brief – only two-and-a-half months. And in that short period of time, we had been on the road to Kishinev for two weeks. During this brief time, I hadn't achieved much. I had almost got entangled in a love affair, which could have turned out to be disastrous… One thing I did accomplish was meeting Fanny Berkovics, who thanks to Jakobovics and me, succeeded in extricating

herself from her terrible situation. My greatest achievement, however, was finding out that *B* was alive, and giving her instructions on how to leave the Soviet Union. It was only fitting – I was the reason she came here in the first place, and now I was facilitating her departure.

Jakobovics and I had written everywhere, to all our friends and acquaintances abroad. But before we even got a chance to receive a reply to our letters, we were again imprisoned.

=♦=

I was assigned with my brigade to work in a large shoe factory on Bulgarskaya Street in Kishinev. Besides war criminals, workers in this factory included free Soviet citizens, some of whom were Jewish. The POW's did mostly manual labour. One Jew looked at me, and I overheard him remark to a colleague in Yiddish, "I could swear that that Kraut has a Jewish face…"

I couldn't refrain from replying in simple Yiddish, "I am a Jew."

"You are a Jew?" one of them screamed with astonishment. "A Jewish Nazi? Shame on you – what a disgrace to be such a Jew!"

He was right. I did, indeed, feel deeply ashamed as a Jew to be in such a situation.

Even though it was forbidden for free Soviet citizens to speak with war criminals, I screwed up the courage to go over to this Jew who had such contemptuous pity for me, and inquired, "You probably know Reb Yekhiel?"

"How do you come to know Yekhiel?" he asked me with amazement.

"Don't ask too many questions," I replied. "Go to Reb Yekhiel and tell him that Eliezer Basch is here."

It was against the rules for me to speak to him, so I had to make it short and snappy. It turned out that he did, indeed, inform Reb Yekhiel. I don't know whether he did so because he wanted to help me out, or just to satisfy his curiosity about how a Jew could be a Nazi – or both. One thing for sure, however, this Jew did me a big favour, no question.

The next day, Reb Yekhiel came running to my place of work. I have no idea how he gained admittance, since visitors needed special permission to enter. I was very moved when I saw him. He didn't come empty handed. He brought a few letters – letters that I had been awaiting for years and years, which I had dreamt about for so long. One was from *B*, a second from my brother Isaac, in New York, and a third from my sister Goldie, in Montreal, Canada.

B wrote that she would heed my advice and try to achieve what her friend Fanny Berkovics had done. She hoped to meet me shortly in Moscow at the Hungarian consulate.

My brother Isaac informed me of his deep regret at having to offset the joy of my survival with distressing news about our family's demise. Unfortunately, in this, his first letter, he had the sad duty to tell me about the tragedy that had befallen our loved ones during the Nazi atrocities. It so happened that I read that letter from Isaac on the 25th of Iyar – the exact date of the *yartzeit* of my parents and other Sighet Jews. May the Lord avenge their blood!

Isaac did not forget to express the great joy that the family had experienced upon finding out that I was among the living.

Reb Yekhiel must have gone to extraordinary measures to make his way into the yard where I was working. He could have been arrested, because one of the *nachalniks* saw him speaking to me, which was against the regulations. Fortunately, the *nachalnik* merely chased him away. Luckily for us both, I was not searched. If they had found a letter from America on me – a war criminal – it would have been quite a sight to behold. Reb Yekhiel gave me a few hundred rubles, and hurried away. I thanked him from the bottom of my heart. As I watched him take his leave, I prayed that no harm would befall him on my account.

=♦=

I was very pleased that *B* would in all probability make it to Moscow. At least she would be a free person! I was also happy to find in one of my letters the address of my brother Shmuel in Budapest. Given my present circumstances, it looked highly unlikely that *B* and I would meet in Moscow. This way, she could wait for me in Budapest at my brother's. Indeed, his address was to come in handy later.

Since I was in a POW camp, I stopped all correspondence with my family. I didn't want them to know where I was. I was afraid – and rightly so – that if they learned my whereabouts, they would try to have me released, which might only make matters worse.

=♦=

It was my duty as *brigadir* at the shoe factory to ensure that the Germans under my command did the work assigned to them, and I was responsible for determining their *norma*.

Occasionally, free citizens who worked together with the Germans would, of their own initiative, request the services of the German war prisoners for some extra *robitiyanke*, additional tasks. In other words, they wanted the Germans to do side jobs that would not be credited to their *norma*. When this happened with another brigade, I looked the other way, since it was none of my business. But when they sought to take away Germans from my brigade to do some side *robitiyanke*, I didn't permit it.

"I'm the *brigadir* and I'm responsible for the work of my brigade members-- what they should do and not do!" I announced. This was how I would defend my brigade.

On one occasion, a *nachalnik* insisted that he had the right to employ the services of some Germans for a side *robitiyanke*. And as usual in such cases, I refused. That little *nachalnik* screamed and cursed in Russian. I responded in the same Russian manner – profanity for profanity. As I said, I had learned how to curse, *po-materi*, passably in Russian. That free citizen saw that he was dealing with a very peculiar war prisoner, some tough guy that he couldn't win over. So he went to the head *nachalnik* of the factory.

"How is it possible," he protested, "for a *plenik*, a POW, to contradict a free Soviet citizen?"

The onlookers, prisoners and free citizens, warned me that the *nachalnik* would most likely penalize me for my *chutzpah*, but I wasn't scared. How surprised everybody was when the head *nachalnik* took my side.

"He has the full authority over his brigade," the head *nachalnik* asserted, "and he does not have to listen to everybody."

I later found out that the person who had complained about me was himself a Jew. How funny it must have looked, to have a Jew defending Nazis so that another Jew should not – God forbid – take advantage of them, and treat them unjustly.

This can certainly be considered one of the oddities of my 'career' as a Soviet prisoner of war.

=♦=

When I had been free, I used to glance over from my work site to the POW camp and watch the prisoners' movements. Now, in contrast, I was watching the movements of my acquaintances with whom I had worked only a short time before, from the other side of the fence.

Although our situation as free men had not been very pleasant – we certainly had not been licking honey out there – we still craved the little independence that we had enjoyed. Now, as prisoners again, we would stand in one spot in the camp yard where we could get the best view of the people with whom we had worked, and we would daydream about our freedom.

In the camp there was a library containing only German books, so if we wanted to read, we had to read in German. We had no choice. A special German weekly was

published in Moscow for the prisoners of war, full of Communist propaganda, tailored to German tastes. I would read these papers, even though they always left me with a bitter aftertaste, as if I had eaten rotten eggs. I read those propaganda papers to see if I could detect, between the lines, what was happening in the world.

That was how I found out details about the elections in the States between Truman and Dewey. I also learned from the German papers that there existed a 'Truman Doctrine.' Of course, the Soviets harshly criticized this doctrine, and gave examples of how nefarious it was for world freedom.

I was often forced to listen to Russian officers speaking to their prisoners of war, and comparing Truman to Hitler.

I recall a joke in the humour section of the German POW papers in connection with the American election campaign:

"Who would be able to do more for America, Truman or Dewey?" "Whoever loses."

There existed a so-called 'anti-Fascist' group in the camp. They were the leaders in the camp, and the cream of the German intelligentsia. The main objective of this anti-Fascist group was to help the Russian officers spread Communist propaganda among the prisoners of war in indirect ways. For example, they would praise the Soviet system – its achievements in the economic sphere, as well as its successes in the international arena, and demonstrate how Soviet Russia was striving to improve the lot of all mankind. These anti-Fascists were more privileged than all the other war prisoners in every respect. The best and the brightest among them were sent to Moscow to take a special course in

Marxism, Leninism and Stalinism. These leopards were indoctrinated in the hope that they would not only change their spots, but also their beliefs. The Soviet objective was to teach them the Communist Torah, and have them become true *ba'al tshuva'nikes,* confirmed penitents. Then, once they were freed, they would be well versed in the tenets of Communism, and work on converting the German masses to embrace the Communist faith.

A remark from one of the trained agitators still sticks in my mind. In a propaganda speech upon his return from Moscow, he said to his fellow Germans, "I'm sure that many of you wonder why Hitler lost the war… Doubtless, many of you still regret the total destruction of Fascism… Subconsciously, this defeat still rankles deep in your hearts… A lot of you still discuss how the war might have ended with the Fascists victorious."

Chapter 44 - An Honest Citizen

No matter how unpleasant it was for us in the POW camp with German war prisoners, we had to admit that, from a material and hygienic point of view, we had it much better here than when we had been free. We got our daily *payok* of bread, six hundred grams, in time; in addition, we were given a portion of soup and *kasha* twice a day. There was plenty of water, we were allowed to take baths whenever we wanted, and we could disinfect our clothing any time, so we had no reason to fear that we would be infested by lice again. But there was still one curse we couldn't get rid of – the bedbugs. Those red creatures tortured me and sucked my blood for the full eight years that I was in Soviet prisons and camps.

While we had been free in Kishinev, we never saw a dog or a cat. The food shortage was so great that nobody could afford to spare their meagre rations to feed house pets; as a matter of fact, some people were so desperate they actually ate them. Here in the POW camp, although we did not eat to our fill, we were assured of our *payok*, and thus managed to survive, unlike many on the outside. I fail to understand why the Germans deserved to be treated more humanely than free citizens.

During all my years of incarceration in the Soviet jails and in the various camps, I rarely had enough to eat. In truth, I was sentenced to relentless starvation for years and years, but I must admit that hunger was not my harshest punishment. One can get used to hunger; hunger pales in comparison with other adversities.

=♦=

It happened several times that I recognized people that I knew as I was marched on the streets of Kishinev on my way to work with my brigade. I noticed how some of them averted their eyes, and looked very uncomfortable. Doubtless, it must have been distressing for them to see Jakobovics and me surrounded by a band of Nazis, marching under the escort of two armed soldiers.

One day, I happened to notice Clara and Hannah Fishman. It was painful for me to see how Clara almost fell into a faint, while her sister-in-law, Hannah, quickly caught her, and wiped the tears from her eyes.

Often as we marched on the Kishinev streets, Jewish boys between the ages of ten and twelve would chase us and shout, "Fascists! Nazis!"

Our guards tried to chase them away, without much success. Jewish children of that age were already well aware of the immense tragedy suffered by our nation during the Second World War, and they certainly knew who the perpetrators of this tragedy were. Little wonder, then, that they hurled insults and even threw stones occasionally to demonstrate their contempt towards those who had plotted their destruction.

Although I was among those 'Fascists and Nazis,' I enjoyed seeing those young Jewish boys take the law into their own hands, and protest against this murderous nation.

Adults were not allowed to commit such acts. The Soviet Union strongly forbade demonstrations of disrespect towards prisoners of war, but youngsters looked upon it as a mitzvah to break this law.

As luck would have it, on one of the rare occasions when the children threw stones, I myself got hit on the temple. My forehead began to bleed profusely. One of the soldiers wanted to chase after the little boy and beat him up. That soldier didn't know that I was a Jew, but only wanted to do his duty and defend the prisoners under his charge.

I cannot say that I was very happy with this mark of Cain inflicted upon me by that young boy, but I tried to restrain the soldier. "I ask you, Commander," I entreated him. "Leave him be; he was only *playing*. He didn't mean any harm."

=♦=

We petitioned the authorities with many *zayavlenies,* requests for our release, without success. We didn't even receive a reply.

I made friends with a Russian officer who was the *politruk*, propaganda agent, of the camp. His mission was to indoctrinate the POWs and convince them of the evils of Fascism, and the flaws of the capitalist system; in short, his job was to influence them that it would be wonderful if Communism reigned over the whole world. I was pretty sure that he didn't believe a word of what he was preaching, but it was his job to agitate, and in the Soviet Union, you do what you are told.

That officer advised me to write a *zayavlenie* to the head of the Moldavski SSR, and address my protest to him. He was sure it would help.

I figured that I didn't have anything to lose if I tried again, although I had protested so often that I had given up hope by now. I wasn't very enthusiastic about this endeavour, but this time it actually did help. The head *nachalnik* of the Moldavski SSR wrote a decree on my behalf: "Free him immediately!"

The decree was only about me, with no word about my other half, Jakobovics, but I was advised that he would be liberated as well.

The *nachalnik* of the *lager* called us into his office. He wasn't alone; he was together with some other officers with whom he had probably had a *consilium* about our release. The *nachalnik* completely ignored Jakobovics as if I were the only convict in the room; he spoke only to me. He knew that whatever I would say applied to Jakobovics as well.

"Well, you are free." With these words the *nachalnik* addressed me as soon as I came to the door. "You can choose any place in Soviet Russia, and I will get you a train ticket and documents. You are a free man and can go wherever you want."

I thanked him for his kindness and goodwill and replied, "*Grazhdanin Nachalnik*, this is one of the happiest moments in my life, and it's a great honour to be rehabilitated and to be a free citizen again. But I am worried that I might be arrested again, even though I am innocent… Here in Soviet Russia I have nobody – no friends, no acquaintances. My record is of a convict and a prisoner of war. That's why I would be very happy if you would send me to a repatriation centre from where I would have the opportunity to go home, where my deceased parents left a house and where my record is clean… I want to start a new life as *an honest citizen*."

The officers listened to me open-mouthed. They looked at each other and started to whisper among themselves. They were probably moved by my words, and doubtless the head *nachalnik's* decree on my behalf must have softened their NKVD hearts; yet they couldn't decide then and there what to do with me. Finally the *nachalnik* asked me, "Do you have an inkling where such a repatriation centre might be?"

I had heard, during the time that I was free, that there was a repatriation centre in Munkacz, in the Russian Carpathians, where many Romanian and Hungarian citizens were sent after the war. I told the *nachalnik* what I knew – and he accepted that information at face value.

The next day they called us in again and gave us documents, train tickets and provisions for two days. The German camp commandant, who took care of our formalities, gently bade us farewell, and somewhat enviously, watched as we disappeared from the other side of the barbed wire fence to freedom.

Our release papers indicated that we were freed from POW camp 198, and we had permission to apply to the Munkacz repatriation centre.

After having endured four months in the Kishinev camp with German POWs, I could hardly believe that we were really truly liberated and that we could move about again freely. We desperately wanted to hope that we had finally come to the end of our nightmare that had been hanging like the sword of Damocles over us for seven years.

=♦=

We didn't go directly to the Kishinev station, as we had been instructed to do. Instead we headed to Reb Yekhiel's home, to share our joy with him. We also wanted to

express our appreciation for the courage and selflessness he had demonstrated in visiting our workplace. Needless to say, Reb Yekhiel was elated. When he saw our happy faces, he understood that salvation had finally come, and he recited a blessing over us, "*Baruch matir asurim*!"[73]

It was *erev Shabbos T'shuva*, the Friday night between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. In honour of this Sabbath, Reb Yekhiel had plenty of good food and delicacies laid out. We were well received and felt right at home, as we sat at the table, adorned with Sabbath candles. We savoured the fresh chicken soup, *khallah* and all the other fine Sabbath fare. Everything tasted so delightful, we felt as if we were enjoying the pleasures of the Garden of Eden.

Reb Yekhiel gently chided us for not coming to him for advice instead of going to the *nachalnik* of the border watch. If we had approached him we would have been spared much suffering, and he would have given us money for our trip to Moscow. As soon as he had found out that we had been trapped anew, he had no peace. All the Jews in Kishinev were interested in our fate, he declared, and they discreetly tried to use their influence on our behalf, but it was not easy.

At Reb Yekhiel's I found a letter from *B*. She wondered why our correspondence had got interrupted. She didn't know what to think. Perhaps I had succeeded to make it to Hungary, she speculated, and hadn't been able to get in touch with her in time. Therefore, she would travel by herself to Budapest, in the hope that she would meet me there.

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[73] Blessed is the Lord who unties those who are bound.

I was very happy that at least *B* was able to follow my advice, even though I had not been able to benefit from it myself. When Jakobovics and I said goodbye to Reb Yekhiel, I asked him to give heartfelt regards to all the Jews who had worried so much about our fate. I requested that he also send my best regards to the Fishmans, and ask them to excuse me for not seeing them before I left, since we had been ordered to go straight to the station and leave Kishinev. Reb Yekhiel gave us some money for the road, and wished us, "Go in good health and prosper. May God spare you from further pain and suffering, and *L'shana ha'ba'ah b'yirushalaim,* Next year in Jerusalem!"

We saw a ray of hope before our eyes, and as we left Reb Yekhiel's home, we thought about one thing – how we could get rid of the Russkies once and for all. Confidently, with our heads high, we headed towards the Kishinev train station.

Chapter 45 - A Fragile Bridge Made of Paper

We reached Munkacz, where our repatriation centre was supposed to be, on the day before Yom Kippur.

Our arrival in Munkacz just before Yom Kippur had great significance: we would be able to spend our most sacred holiday – after so many years – among Jews. For me, personally, this event had a special meaning. My father, may he rest in peace, used to go to the rabbi of Munkacz every *erev* Yom Kippur.

If I had wanted to analyze the situation in more depth, I would even contend that *ma'aseh avot siman l'vanim*, the deeds of the father are an omen to his sons. The Spinker rebbe, Rav Yitzkhak Eizik[74] (he perished in Auschwitz) had lived for many years in Munkacz, and my father who was a Spinker Hassid, used to go to Munkacz to see him twice a year – on Purim and on Yom Kippur. On Purim – for merriment, and on Yom Kippur – for atonement.

And now – all of a sudden – here I was in Munkacz, precisely on *erev* Yom Kippur!

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[74] 1875-1944. A chapter dedicated to Rabbi Yitzhak Eizik is contained in *Concealed Profiles* by Eliezer Basch.

I also had another connection with this city: my mother had been born in Munkacz, and my parents had got married there. Munkacz, therefore, evoked a whole association with events from the past.

It can be said of Munkacz that before the war it was the most Jewish city in the Carpathians. Thousands of Hassidim used to stream in from all corners of Hungary, Romania and Czechoslovakia for the holidays. The Munkacz Jewish population had not been particularly large compared to other Jewish cities – only between twelve and fifteen thousand among a general population of thirty thousand. Yet Munkacz had been famous and had had more significance from a Jewish standpoint than many cities with a much greater number of Jews.

Now, however, Munkacz was almost a ghost town, where Jewishness and Jewish spirit were concerned. You hardly met a Jew on the street, and there was only one *shul* for the few hundred who had miraculously escaped the crematoria. The Munkacz Jews had suffered the same fate as the other Hungarian Jews – they had been deported to Auschwitz.

Jakobovics and I were supposed to register with the NKVD upon our arrival, but since it was *erev* Yom Kippur, we decided to let them wait until after the holiday. Instead we went to apply to Rabbi Kahane, the spiritual leader of Munkacz. Afterwards we went with the rest of the Jews to *shul* to pound our fists against our chests and atone for our sins.

We were wearing German uniforms, so at first the Jews looked at us with suspicion, but as soon as they heard our fluent, articulate Yiddish, as we recounted our Jewish sorrows, they changed their minds, and ignored our outward appearance.

Rabbi Kahane was the first to put a hundred rubles in our pockets, but he was not the only one. Several other Jews did likewise. We had quite enough; what did we need so much money for anyhow? All that we were interested in at that point was to find out where the repatriation centre was.

Rabbi Kahane couldn't stop sighing as he listened to our story. He kept repeating, "Heaven preserve us! Heaven preserve us!" [75]

Nobody could tell us anything about a repatriation centre in Munkacz. Yes, there had been one here before, but it had long been relocated, and nobody knew where to.

How could it be possible that the Kishinev NKVD sent us to a place that did not exist? What would we do now? We had no other choice than to register with the Munkacz NKVD, and obey their instructions.

In the meantime, it was *erev* Yom Kippur, so we might as well pray for a good year.

=♦=

Although we were free, and together with Jews, somehow we had the feeling that our poor freedom was slipping out of our hands. It was as if it was built on a fragile bridge made of paper, and wouldn't last much longer…

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[75] The original Yiddish expression is *Rahkmone litslan*: Heaven preserve us, said especially after hearing about something loathsome.

We didn't know how to help ourselves. Maybe we should go to Slotvina, and illegally cross the border from there to Sighet? This was one border I was very familiar with! No, that wouldn't work. We looked suspicious and would surely be caught. We would have to go home honestly. We had missed one opportunity by not going to the Hungarian consulate in Moscow before we became war prisoners. That was water under the bridge. Now we would play it safe. We didn't dare risk our future, even if the road leading there was likely to be rocky.

In Munkacz the atmosphere was entirely different from that of Kishinev and Belz. Of course, I had no complaints to make about the Kishinev or the Belz Jews -- they didn't owe me anything. However, I felt more at home among the Munkacz Jews. Somehow, we understood each other. It was interesting to see how they fought over us. Each Jew, without exception, now felt that this was the perfect chance to perform the *mitzvah* of welcoming guests. We had already promised one Jew that we would be his guests before the fast as well as after the fast. Another one berated him, "You're so selfish. I'm begging you, let me have one of them at least!"

All of a sudden somebody by the name of Herschel Roth appeared and told me that he was a relative of mine, a second or third cousin. He declared that he had visited my parents' home many times, and had eaten and slept there often, so he asserted, "It's only right that you should be my guest."

We were absolutely moved to tears by the kindness the Munkacz Jews showed to us. After so many years of living without those near and dear to us, we now had the

feeling that every person here was our devoted and cherished friend. We just wanted to embrace all of them and give them each a big kiss.

Our comradeship with the Munkacz Jews did not last long. After Yom Kippur we went to apply to the NKVD. (Did we have a choice?) A clerk looked perplexedly at our papers as if they were written in Chinese, and finally he said callously, "Your whole freedom is a mistake. There is no longer a repatriation centre here in Munkacz. Go to Ungvár and apply over there to the Carpathian NKVD centre. They will know there what to do with you."

Brokenheartedly, we said farewell to the Munkacz Jews. They, too, all felt sad for us. I will be thankful to the Munkacz Jews for the rest of my life.

=♦=

We arrived in Ungvár on *erev* Sukkoth. Before the war, Ungvár had always had a smaller Jewish population than Munkacz. Now, too, Jewish community life was not as well organized, and the congregation less active; Ungvár had half as many Jews as Munkacz – less than two hundred. Despite their small number, they treated us very well, just like the Munkaczers had. The Ungvár Jews also had compassion for us, and fought over who should have the privilege of taking us in and providing us with food and lodging.

In Munkacz, Ungvár and other towns in the Carpathians as a whole, the Jewish population was anxious. The terrible suffering that they had just lived through in the various concentration camps, and the cataclysmic Holocaust that Nazism had wrought at

every turn was still very painful. Their raw wounds were far from being healed. The future appeared bleak.

The Jews were ready to do what they could for us; if we needed money, they would gladly give us a few thousand rubles. But there was one thing they couldn't do – they had no advice to give us. It looked like they could use some good advice themselves.

Chapter 46 - Badge of Shame

With our heads down, we went to register with the NKVD. A small officer with a friendly smile greeted us and told us his name was Zaitsev.

The officer, a skinny little man with a blond forelock, was very polite. He didn't behave arrogantly like the typical Soviet clerks we had met; he was pleasant and affable as if we were the best of friends.

"*Vashi dokumenty, pozhaluista.* Let me see your documents, please," he requested amiably, as if he were asking us to do him a favour. He looked over our papers and smiled behind his whiskers. He treated those documents, which were the most valuable item in the world to us, very nonchalantly. He crumpled them as if they were completely worthless, and shoved them into the breast pocket of his jacket.

"Come back in three days," he said jovially.

"*Tovarishch* Zaitsev," (since I was already a free person, I could allow myself to call him *tovarishch*; a prisoner was forbidden to call a free citizen *tovarishch*, only *grazhdanin*), "What will happen to our documents?" I asked him desperately.

"Nothing!" Zaitsev spat and said, "What are you afraid of – that they'll catch you without documents? If that happens, they'll bring you to me anyway."

Something smelled fishy here! If someone was caught without documents, he was brought to Zaitsev, and Zaitsev was the one who was supposed to save us?

I tried to start a conversation with this Zaitsev, to try to find out what would happen to us. "Where will we eat and sleep for three days?"

"You are Jews. What Hungarian Jews will not give you to eat? What Jews would not let you sleep over?" he responded, confidently.

How well he knew everything, this Zaitsev!

He was such a friendly person, and didn't seem to mind chatting with me. Since he seemed so well informed about matters that had no connection with him, maybe he really knew where we would be sent.

"Where will we be taken in three days?" I asked him as if we were great pals.

"To the repatriation centre," he replied.

I wouldn't have been so mistrustful of Zaitsev if he hadn't taken away our documents and if he hadn't been the official responsible for people caught without proper identification.

=♦=

When our three days were up, we went back to Zaitsev's office. As soon as we arrived, we became suspicious about this appointment, because we weren't the only ones at the NKVD headquarters. They told all of us to wait in a sort of transit cell where an armed soldier stood and watched over us. It didn't take long before they shoved us into boxcar and we started to move.

"Where are we going?"

"To Lvov!"

Lvov! Well, that was one place we hadn't seen yet!

Why did they have to take us to Lvov when our home was in the opposite direction? Was there a repatriation centre in Lvov? Somehow, we doubted it very much.

If they told us we were on our way to Lvov, it was more than likely that that's where we would be heading. Let it be Lvov, as long as there was an end to our troubles.

No such luck. On exactly Simkhat Torah we were brought to a camp of war criminals in Lvov.

=♦=

Like the POW camp in Kishinev, the Lvov camp consisted mostly of Germans; however there were some Romanians and Hungarians here as well. The Germans in Lvov, too, were the main ringleaders, since the NKVD trusted them, and treated them the best.

I recall overhearing a Soviet officer discussing why the Russians gave all the key positions in the camp to the Germans.

"Germany," he explained, "used to be a strong power. In Europe they were a force to be reckoned with. In the future, the world will have to take the Germans seriously. But the Hungarians and the Romanians and the rest of the former German satellites, were just followers of the great powers, and they will always remain followers. What's the point of treating them well?"

To my astonishment, I met a Jewish lad by the name of Herschel Fixler in the Lvov camp. I found out from him that there were quite a few young Jewish men in other

POW camps as well. Herschel Fixler was from Slotvina in the Carpathians. He had also suffered the same fate as Jakobovics and me. He, too had been a *perebezchik*, had been released, and then, one fine day, found himself in the Lvov POW camp. Fixler was still very young. He had been only sixteen when he fled to the Russians. He had been born in Romania, but before the war he had lived in Slotvina, just on the border between Romania and the Carpathians, which were now under the Soviets. The Carpathians, too, had undergone several changes of hands: from the Czechoslovakians to the Hungarians, and ultimately to the Russians.

When Fixler was released from the Siberian *lager*, he went home – to Slotvina. He hoped to find everything as had been before the war, or at least to meet some members of his family. Upon his arrival home, he found out that there was nobody. It was heartbreaking to listen to Fixler recount his sad tale.

"When I came to the street that I lived, where I had spent all my childhood years," Herschel began, "I first looked around the neighbourhood to see if there was at least one person that I knew. I didn't find one familiar face. I stopped beside every tree and remembered how I used to climb them. I felt like hugging the trees and kissing them and wishing them '*Sholem aleikhem*.' I stopped next to each cottage and, one by one, I examined them, together with the people in the yards. I looked at each face, to see if I could find someone familiar. But I didn't see anybody I knew.

"I slowly approached the house where I had lived with my parents and brothers and sisters. I wanted to believe that soon, soon I would meet with a loved one, and that there would be a joyful celebration that would last for days. Somehow I had a feeling that

I was in for a big disappointment… The closer I came to the house where I had lived, the more afraid I was to go into the front yard… And when I did go into the yard, I didn't see a living soul. Finally I came to the door, and I knocked, and I heard a harsh voice ask me, 'Who's there?' I instinctively answered 'It's me.'

"When the door opened, I saw before my eyes the angry face of a big ugly Russian, who yelled at me, 'Who are you and what do you want?' "

Fixler later found out that his brother had survived, and was living in Romania. So he figured it would be a good idea to apply for repatriation as a Romanian citizen, since he had actually been born there. And that was how Herschel Fixler found himself in a POW camp among war criminals.

=♦=

Here in the Lvov camp, I also applied to the authorities. I didn't stop demanding truth and justice. I always asked 'How come? How is it possible?' All my requests helped me not in the least. I quickly came to the conclusion that I was banging my head against a brick wall in trying to advocate for the end of my exile and imprisonment. I might as well try to bring about the coming of the Messiah. There was nothing I could do – I had no other choice than to follow blind fate. Whatever would happen to the rest of the POWs would happen to me too.

All the war criminals had to wear an armband with the inscription VP, *Voenno-Plennik*– Prisoner of War. The Jews in the camp were no exception. Indeed, it reminded us of the yellow patch that the Jews had had to wear during the time of the Nazis, and we

were now living to see the Germans getting the same ill treatment they had so recently inflicted on us.

"Good," I thought. "Let them know what it feels like to wear a badge of shame on their arms." Everything would be well and good if not one Jew would have been among the prisoners of war. Or if there had been a Jew among them, let it be someone who had betrayed his own nation and had helped the Germans. Why did this misfortune have to happen to us?"

I often discussed this situation with Russian officers, who were mildly surprised. But the Russians are generally indifferent to odd phenomena, especially when troubles afflict somebody else. They just shrugged their shoulders, and remained unmoved. They would reply, "If you are in this camp, you probably deserve it."

One officer even found a moral to our story. "If you are Romanian citizens," he claimed, "you know that Romania fought against us during the war. So it's more than understandable that Romania is guilty, and owes reparations to Soviet Russia, because of the damage that she did to us!"

I tried to explain to this 'righteous' officer that we had not been in Romania at all during the war, and therefore we couldn't have done any damage to the Soviet Union. Why, then, were we considered so guilty that the Soviet authorities should heap curses on us and make us responsible for sins we hadn't committed? Why should we have to pay for Antonescu's sin of supporting Hitler during the war?

My words fell on deaf ears. He replied, "You, together with all the Romanian citizens, are collectively responsible for everything."

=♦=

In Lvov we worked at an electric power plant. They wanted to make me a *brigadir* over Hungarians and Romanians here too, but I declined the honour. I had come to the conclusion that if I was destined to taste the bitter potion of being a prisoner of war, I might as well drink it all up. I preferred to be just a simple worker.

Chapter 47 - Hope

From time to time, some groups of POWs were sent home. Regular transports went to Germany, Hungary and Romania, but Jakobovics, Fixler and I remained in the camp. We Jews didn't belong to the German transport, because we were obviously not Germans. We didn't belong to the Hungarian transport either, since we had declared that we were Romanian citizens. We could have belonged to the Romanian transport, but there was a catch – they didn't send us back there because when we had come to Russia in the first place, we had been Hungarian citizens.

Germans we were definitely not. Hungarians we were also not. Romanians we were, but according to the Soviets, maybe we were and maybe we weren't. But Jews we were for sure. What in God's name were *we* doing here?

One Jewish officer did have pity on us. I could see that he believed everything I told him. I was sure that he would gladly have helped me if he could, but he was powerless to do anything of the kind. Once in a while, out of the blue, we would receive an extra portion of bread. We were not told why we got a larger *payok*, but we imagined that the Jewish officer was probably behind it. It wasn't so much the extra food that made

an impression on us, it was more that we had actually come into contact with a Soviet official who was not indifferent to our circumstances.

This officer called me one day and told me, "There is strong possibility that you may be freed shortly. As soon as I find out more details about your freedom, I'll let you know."

By March, this officer had already been informed that we would be transported to a repatriation centre on May 15, 1948, and from there we would be liberated for sure. He called me in again, and advised me, "Be patient, it won't be long, only a few more weeks… There is a *prikaz* from the main authorities that you should be sent to a repatriation centre on May 15th. Don't tell anybody but your two Jewish friends, because it's still a secret… Try to be patient. Pretty soon there will finally be an end to your suffering."

Of course, I thanked the officer countless times for his trust in me, and for confiding such a big secret, but deep in my heart I didn't believe him. I had been disappointed too many times already; the Soviet authorities had deceived me too often, so how could I suddenly believe a Russian official, even if he was a Jew.

Even so, we could hardly wait for the 15th, just in case there was some truth to his story. And – wouldn't you know it – the officer had not let us down, this time. For once, a Soviet official had revealed a compassionate truth. We were to be sent to another camp near Stryj, not far from Lvov. As we left the Lvov camp, the Jewish officer, beaming with joy, bid us farewell.

=♦=

We met thirty-six Jews in the camp near Stryj. Among them were four young men from Sighet: Moishe Indig, Moishe Veisner, Y. Berkovics and Getzl Perl. I also met Itzik Baer Junger's uncle, Mendel Marmor from the town of Lapus.

Not all of the young people were former *perebezchiks*. Some had been interned in POW camps for different reasons. How had these young men come to be here? The answer would be quite laughable, if it weren't so tragic. These men were in Hungarian work battalions, set up especially for Jews. According to the Russian way of thinking, that meant that the Jews had collaborated with the Hungarian Fascists. Since the Hungarians and the Romanians owed reparations for the damages they had caused the Russians, the Jewish men were arrested together with the rest of the Hungarians as they marched back to Hungary after the war. It didn't matter if they were Fascists or not. As our sages said, 'If an evil tyrant is in power, he makes no distinction between good and evil.' So it was with the Russians: everybody – perpetrators and victims – were all lumped together.

So what if tens of thousands of Jewish young men were forcibly enlisted with the Hungarians in special labour brigades, the so-called *Munkas-Szolgálat*, reserved only for Jews. So what if the Jews in those battalions suffered greatly, and many perished because of this Magyar evil. So what if the Soviets now had a good opportunity to loosen the chains of the few remaining victims and free them. That wasn't the Soviet way. Instead they arrested them and threw them together with the Hungarian Fascists and war criminals in Soviet camps, so that the Jews would help the Hungarians pay damages for the war.

Many young people suffered from this Soviet 'justice;' many shared the same fate.

=♦=

Once a month, the prisoners of war in the camp were given permission to write a card, via the Soviet Red Cross. We were allowed to write twenty-five words, which included the recipient's address. I did not want to communicate with anybody while I was interned, since I didn't want my relatives to press for my freedom from abroad, but I felt obliged to let *B* know that I was still alive. I had a feeling that she was in Budapest with my brother Avrum Shmuel, hoping that I would soon join her there. I sent her a postcard, care of my brother. In truth, I couldn't be sure that she was in Budapest, but I hoped and dreamed that she might be. Thus my postcard became a sign that I was not lost, that I was among the living. This sign of life turned out to be of vital importance for *B* – it stopped her from losing hope.

If I hadn't insisted on declaring that I was a Romanian (since Sighet had reverted back to Romania by then), I would have saved myself much difficulty and unpleasantness. As a Hungarian citizen, I could have gone directly to Hungary from the camp, and could have met up with *B* immediately. Regretfully, I hadn't had enough intuition to figure it out. So I remained a Romanian, and would be repatriated by the Soviets. Therefore in order to reunite with *B*, I would have to attempt to illegally cross the Romanian-Hungarian border, thus putting myself again in grave danger.

In the last few days before I was freed, a homey atmosphere developed in the camp. I was brought together with many youths who remembered me from before the war. I met several people from Sighet, who shared their memories about our birthplace

and what had happened there since I had left. The Sigheters didn't fail to clue me in on what had been said about *B* and me after our escape to the Soviet Union. As I listened to these stories from home, I truly felt as if my whole past was unfolding before my eyes like a panorama; unfortunately this scene was clouded with many dark areas.

=♦=

The preparations for our transport were going ahead full steam. But the joy of our personal freedom was overshadowed by much greater news. Just as we were making arrangements for our exodus from Russia, we found out about the creation of the Jewish state!

This wondrous event took us by surprise. Our excitement cannot be described by mere words. Every Jewish person in the camp ran about gleefully shouting, "A Jewish state has been proclaimed!" "A Jewish homeland at last!" "A Jewish country called Israel!"

Our elation knew no bounds. We embraced and kissed each other, thrilled that our dream had finally come true. After two thousand years, the aspiration of generations was fulfilled at last: a Jewish state! Our joy in the camp was twofold. We were being liberated at the same time as the proclamation of the state of Israel. We felt that our freedom was not only physical, but spiritual as well.

We read in the Russian newspaper, in black and white, that Russia itself – Russia, that had always been the number one enemy of Zionism – was actually among the first nations to recognize the Jewish state. Without fail, this must be a miracle; we must be witnesses to the coming of the Messiah! We read with much interest the diplomatic notes

exchanged between the foreign affairs ministers of the Soviet Union and Israel, Molotov and Moshe Sharett.

We weren't satisfied just to keep within ourselves the joy that filled our hearts. We wanted to actively show our solidarity, and convey the great delight of the whole Jewish people. All the Jews in the camp banded together and we sang the Israeli national anthem, *Hatikvah*;[76] we shouted with one voice, as if we were on Mount Sinai, "Long live the Jewish state!" "Long live the Jewish people!" "Long live freedom!" "*Am Yisroel Khai*! *Am Yisroel Khai*! The people of Israel live! The nation of Israel thrives!"

Whoever has an inkling about circumstances in a Soviet POW camp knows that we risked a lot with our acts of solidarity with the Jewish nation, and especially with our singing of the *Hatikvah*.

=♦=

Although we were transported from Lvov to a repatriation camp in Stryj, as early as May 15, it still took a whole month for the transport to be organized. The last days in camp were the worst. We couldn't eat; we couldn't sleep. We were extremely restless, and itching to get out of there. We waited impatiently for the happy hour when we would finally breathe free air.

At long last, the hour of our freedom came!

We were all ready and set. They assembled us in the yard, two hundred and fifty of us. The *nachalnik* delivered a farewell speech.

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[76]*Hatikvah:* Hope

The *nachalnik* spoke, but who wanted to listen? His words went in one ear and out the other. What was he blabbering about there? Let him finally open the gate and let us out. No matter how much we disliked his speech, no matter how much he got on our nerves, we could tell that he was addressing us in an entirely different tone. Somehow he spoke to us in a fatherly and tender way, as if he weren't an NKVD'ist at all.

"*Rebyata*," he pronounced, "I'm speaking to you now as to free citizens of a friendly government. I know what you lived through during the war. Maybe you were often bitter about our treatment, but it wasn't our fault. The warmongers started it and because of them you were exposed to great danger. Now go home to your families and give them hearty regards in the name of Soviet Russia. Tell your loved ones that the whole Romanian nation has a big and mighty neighbour and friend, the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union has only good intentions for all of mankind in the whole world! In the name of the Soviet government and in the name of the whole Russian nation, I wish you a better future. May you live again in freedom with your families from now on."

Although his speech had some kernel of truth, it was tempered by the shadow of false Communist propaganda. I don't know what kind of impression he made on most of the other war prisoners, but we Jews were totally unaffected by his bombastic oratory.

To the strains of a musical march, they took us to the station. We were placed in cattle cars just like all other transports, but this time the windows were not barred.

It took us ten days until we arrived in the repatriation camp in Paşcani, Romania.

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From all parts of Russia, transports mostly full of war prisoners arrived in Paşcani daily. The POWs usually spent one or two days there until some formalities were taken care of, whereupon they were sent home. Every two weeks a smaller transport arrived containing a reduced number of prisoners. They ended up staying in Paşcani for two weeks instead of two days, since they were given the responsibility of looking after the thousands of POWs who were arriving each day.

As luck would have it, the transport with which I arrived contained only two hundred and fifty people, so my group was assigned to remain an extra two weeks to take care of the rest of the transports. As if I hadn't had enough of camps already!

In Paşcani everyone had to declare where he was going, so that the authorities could prepare their tickets, travel passes and all other necessary documents.

Zelig Jakobovics, my temporary 'comrade,' had just learned a short while before that he had a brother in Szaszregen, Transylvania, so he decided to go there. I only knew that before the war my brother Gershon had lived in Bucharest. My other brother Isaac had mentioned in the letter I had received via Reb Yekhiel that Gershon planned to go to Israel, to join his children. I wasn't sure if I would still find Gershon in Bucharest, but I figured I might as well try my luck and go there. I certainly didn't want to go to Sighet. Who did I have there!

I couldn't even go to the family gravesite, since my parents and the rest of my relatives had been transported to Auschwitz, and perished in the crematoria. I didn't want to set foot on Sighet soil ever again.

The time came when I had to bid farewell to my friends and acquaintances. First and foremost, I went over to Zelig Jakobovics. I had prepared the appropriate words to ask his forgiveness for the grief he had suffered on my account, but instead of letting me speak, he asked for forgiveness from me. Poor Jakobovics!

"I beg of you, Lezer, to forgive me," Jakobovics said. "Forgive me for the pain that I have caused you. I wasn't worth it. You always wanted to do what was best for me, even though it didn't always turn out well… If not for you, I might have ended up remaining in Russia for the rest of my life."

After these words, I had nothing to say to him. We only embraced and kissed each other. We both shed tears for joy that at long last we were to be freed.

"Give a heartfelt regard for your chosen, *B*," he said in conclusion. "Let her know that she should think of me like a relative."

I exchanged letters a few times with Jakobovics. Regretfully, he remained in Romania.

=♦=

Now came the time to say goodbye to Herschel Fixler, who – poor thing – had no idea where he should go. He thought that perhaps his brother was somewhere in Romania. But for all he knew, his brother may have gone to Israel.

"Herschele," I said, "Come with me."

"Yeah, you're right, I guess I should go with you," he replied childishly. "I even thought before that, wherever you will settle, I would try to settle. At this point in time, I have nobody in the world – except you!"

Fixler requested that they issue his travel pass to Bucharest.

Another Jewish young man named Yankel Moskovitch from Viseu was also on his way to Bucharest. He told us that he had nobody left in Viseu, but he was under the impression that he might have a sister in Bucharest, so he would go there. Hence, we were three young Jewish men traveling together to Bucharest.

When I said goodbye to the Sigheters, they expressed their disappointment at my decision not to go to Sighet with them. I only said, "I will never go to Sighet again in my life! Give heartfelt regards if you find any of our acquaintances there. Wish them all, *Next year in Jerusalem*!"

=♦=

We arrived in Bucharest with our few little bundles on our backs, not knowing where to go first. Yankel Moskovitch had the exact address of his sister, so we decided to try our luck there. After that, the plan was to cross over to the other side of the city and ask about my brother Gershon at the Malbim synagogue.

It was July 1948, and the weather was very hot. We were wearing the heavy military clothing that had been issued to us in the POW camps, and could barely find the strength to trudge along the long Bucharest streets.

We first went to the address of Yankel Moskovitch's sister. Yankel went into the house, while Herschel and I waited outside, with the hope that he would come back out with good news. How disappointed we were to see Yankel come out with his head down.

"A Romanian lives there," Yankel informed us despondently. "The Romanian told me, 'A short time ago there lived here a person by the name you gave on the address,

but this person doesn't live here now.' I asked him where my sister might be, but he doesn't know."

We ran over to a Jewish neighbour to find out if perhaps he knew where Yankel's sister lived, and we found out about her sad fate. Yankel's sister, her husband and two small children had tried to cross the Romanian-Hungarian border. They were caught and were now under arrest.

Now it was my turn to try to find my brother. Before the war, Gershon had lived on Mircea Voda Street in the Vacaresti quarter, so off we went.

I went to the place where my brother had lived before the war. There was also a Romanian living there, who told me that he had been living in that apartment for several years and he had no inkling about where the person I was looking for may have moved to. I gave up hope of meeting Gershon in Bucharest.

At that moment the three of us felt that the earth had dissolved from under our feet.

We decided to give it one more try. We went to a Jewish neighbour and asked if he might have any information about my brother Gershon's whereabouts. It turned out that this neighbour did, indeed, know where Gershon lived, and it was only a few blocks away. The neighbour gave me the exact address.

It goes without saying what kind of welcome I received when I arrived at Gershon's place. Telegrams were dispatched immediately to Hungary, America and Canada. That same day, I made a phone call, and for the first time in seven years, got to hear the lovely voice of my beloved *B*.

Chapter 48 - Symbol of Freedom

Fixler and Moskovitch stayed with me at my brother's home for a few weeks. After that, Moskovitch went to Viseu, with the hope of meeting somebody there that he knew, a relative or an acquaintance. Fixler remained in Bucharest for a while. (A few years later I happened to meet Fixler's sister by chance in Montreal. She told me that her brother had died shortly after his release, due to a malady he had inherited – his legacy from the camps.)

My situation wasn't so simple. *B* was in Budapest and I was in Bucharest. As the crow flies, those two cities are not far from each other, but under the current circumstances, it was very difficult to get there from here. Many people were getting arrested daily in Romania for the crime of wanting to cross the border to Hungary.

Here, in Romania, the Soviet regime had managed to establish itself quickly, and bring with it all the miseries associated with the Communist system. There was extreme poverty everywhere. People wanted to save themselves, so they tried to escape to Hungary. Hungary was also being strangled by the brutal hands of Communism, but it was much easier to make it from Hungary to Austria, and from Austria, you could go wherever you wanted.

The Romanian radio and press constantly reported about mass arrests at the Hungarian border. If I had been aware of all this before, when I had been in the camp, I could have gone directly to Hungary instead of Romania. I hadn't realized that there could be so many restrictions and difficulties when trying to travel between two satellites of the Soviet Union.

I went to the Hungarian consulate in Bucharest and told them that I had been freed a few days earlier from Soviet camps. I tried to explain that I hadn't known that my fiancée was in Budapest, because if I had known, I would have gone straight to Hungary. Therefore, I requested an exit visa to Hungary.

The clerk at the Hungarian consulate listened to me with indifference, and gave me an unsympathetic reply: "Why doesn't your fiancée come to Romania? It's much easier to get a visa to go from Hungary to Romania."

I soon realized that I would achieve nothing on the straight and narrow. I had only one solution: to cross the border illegally.

I will not go into the details of my adventures and the dangers that befell me until I achieved my goal: to reach Hungary.

Nor will I describe how impatiently *B* waited until she found out that I had safely crossed the Romanian-Hungarian border, and finally showed up after eight long years.

We had both truly grown up. Everything about us had changed, on the inside as well as on the outside. We had certainly outgrown our baby booties. But one thing stayed the same – our feelings for each other. Our love for each other was as intense and strong now as it had ever been.

"If the only way we could have reached our goal was through this long, long road of pain and suffering, then it was worth it." That is what she told me.

=♦=

Our joy would have been complete if we hadn't received sad news. My brother Gershon's only son, David, fell in the War of Liberation in Israel. He died on the 5th of Iyar, 5708, on the day the Jewish state was proclaimed; he was one of the first, if not indeed the first, who fell as a victim of the Arab invasion of the newly established nation.

And, speaking of the 5th of Iyar, I must add, I figured out a new symbol to add to the ones that Margolis had taught me in prison for how to calculate the most important Jewish holidays. To the symbols *aleph-tof* (א"ת), *beys-shin* (ב"ש), *gimel-reysh* (ג"ר), *dalet-kuf* (ד"ק), *hey-tzadek* (ה"צ), and *vov-pey* (ו"פ), a new symbol could be added: *zayen-ayen* (ז"ע).[77]

Zayen stands for the seventh day of Passover, and *ayen* is the first letter of *Atzma'ut*, which means liberation. The seventh day of Passover falls on the same day of the week as *Yom Ha'Atzma'ut*, the day when the Jewish state was proclaimed.

I adapted the sign ז"ע as a symbol of freedom, because I had learned the other symbols in prison when I had been enslaved.

Yes, *B* and I started a new chapter in the history of our lives. We were freed at the same time as the Jewish nation started a new chapter in its history, a chapter of heroism, independence, perseverance, and victory.

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[77] *Zayen:* The seventh letter of the Hebrew alphabet. *Ayen*: the seventh-to-last letter.

Postscript - Ox-Laws

During all the years I spent in the camps, I had worried that *B* would not be able to survive the camp conditions. Fortunately, my worst fears were not realized. True, she did suffer greatly, both physically and spiritually, but nonetheless, she plucked up her courage and didn't let herself succumb to her harsh treatment. It wasn't easy for a woman to live in the Soviet camps and not be dragged down into the abyss. Interestingly enough, she, like me, tortured herself with feelings of guilt. These unconscious complexes plagued us both throughout our years in the camps. I felt guilty for her sufferings and likewise, she felt guilty for the sufferings of her younger brother Oscar.

On the one hand, if I hadn't known that *B* was also in a Soviet *lager* exclusively because of me, it would have been easier for me to withstand all my miseries. But, then again, maybe I would have lost interest in life and yielded to the temptation towards self-destruction, the way so many others did. The urge to die took hold of every inmate at one time or another. Whenever I felt compelled to take the plunge towards self-mutilation or death, all I had to do was remember *B*. The thought that she might still be alive gave me the strength to carry on and try to survive, for her sake.

That was my only consolation in these dreadful circumstances. I tried to conjecture that it would hurt only her if I were to die or deliberately cripple myself. So I

restrained myself as much as I could and renewed my energy to discover a fresh interest in life. Consequently, I stopped all aggressive methods that could lead to my demise.

As for *B*'s experiences in the Soviet jails, it is important to note that she, too, spent six-and-a-half years in the Soviet camps under the same conditions as the other prisoners. I had not been wrong when I had imagined *B* like the rest of the female *dokhodiagas* I had met in the camps.

B was together with Bernat Berkovics's wife, Fanny and with Herschel Pollack's fiancée, Leah'ke. They were all sent many thousand kilometres south of Pechora to Karaganda *Oblast* in Soviet Central Asia.

=♦=

Among the many hardships that *B* endured in the camps, I will describe two episodes, which, although not the most terrible, are still rather representative of the arbitrariness and cruelty of the Soviet regime.

After our liberation, I asked *B* to describe one of her worst experiences in the *lager*.

"We worked at a *plotina*," she replied. "That's a canal that collects snow in the winter for irrigation, because there was a shortage of water in the summer. We toiled with all our strength. The food was the same as in all Soviet camps: not good and not enough. Many prisoners couldn't keep their strength up, and they dropped like flies.

"The *nachalniks* and *brigadir*s didn't care about that. They were interested in one thing only: for us to produce more and more. So they chased us, '*Davai, davai*!' The *nachalnik* wanted to show his bosses that he could have the work completed much earlier

than scheduled. He kept on threatening the prisoners. He warned us, 'Even if you have to step on your own dead bodies, this plotina must be finished before the scheduled date!' "

The second episode was more tragicomic:

When *B* first came to the camp, she became an *izvozchitsa,* a wagoneer. Instead of horses, she was given two oxen with long horns, and with these two creatures, she had to fill the *norma*.

Believe it or not, even oxen were assigned a *payok* according to their production. If the oxen filled their daily ox-norm, they got a *Stakhanovets payok.* If not, they got a *shtrafnoi payok.* The horses, too, had a norm – a horse-norm. Well, that's the kind of justice you got from the Soviets! The poor prisoners were shown that even cattle were no more privileged than they, and the slogan, 'Those who don't work, don't eat' also applied to the animal species.

B had never had anything to do with animals in her life. She didn't know how to handle them or how to communicate with them. And she certainly had no idea about harnessing them. One day, shortly after her arrival at that particular camp, she was given two oxen, a harness and a wagon, and was told to do the rest herself.

B didn't know that when a pair of oxen have worked together for a long time, each one takes its own position. If an ox is used to being harnessed on the right side, then he has to be harnessed on the right side. If he is used to being harnessed on the left, he must always be harnessed on the left.

B wasn't aware of this Ox-Law, known to all experienced ox drivers, so she mistakenly harnessed the right ox on the left side and the left ox on the right side. Consequently, the ox on the right pulled the wagon in one direction, and the one on the left dragged it in the opposite direction. She begged and cajoled them, beat them with a stick, and screamed at them, to no avail. She begged them in Russian and Hungarian and Yiddish to help her fill the norm. Otherwise, she told them, they would all be on a *shtrafnoi payok*. But no matter what she did, it didn't help. The oxen finally broke free and ran back to the camp, leaving her stranded with a broken wagon, and a starvation ration for that evening.

Such was life in the *lager*. This comic scene is but a symbol of our experiences in the camps.

A Note from the Translator

This has been a labour of love.

My late father, Eliezer Basch, wrote *Under Stalin's Yoke* when I was a teenager. It was serialized in the now-defunct weekly Yiddish newspaper, *Keneder Adler* (Canadian Jewish Eagle, published in Montreal) in the mid-sixties. I remember my Hebrew teachers asking if I was related to Eliezer Basch, and I still recall their words of praise and admiration when they found out I was his daughter. I was too ashamed then to admit that I had never read any of his writings.

Of course, I knew that my parents were both survivors of Stalin's gulag, but I was a child, and just accepted their story at face value, without wanting to delve more deeply into the whys and wherefores of their history. My mother occasionally would recount some of the horrors of her experiences in the prisons and camps, but, more often than not, I listened only perfunctorily. There were even times when I felt embarrassed to have parents who were ex-cons! As I got older, I would sometimes ask my father to describe some details about his wartime experiences and how he managed to escape. His reply: "You'll read my book and you'll find out." Now – thirty-five years after its initial publication – I have read his book and I have indeed found out!

My father passed away from a rare form of lymphatic cancer in the fall of 1995. Throughout his illness, as he became more and more frail and vulnerable, I got to know a side of him that I had not hitherto appreciated. Although he had always been a devoted and caring father, he was loath to share his feelings and show his emotional side. His last

few months on this earth allowed me to see that aspect of his personality, and awakened in me a desire to discover more about him. Fortunately, he had left behind his writings, which would ultimately enable me to get to understand him more after his passing.

Publication of his autobiography has also given me the opportunity to leave a legacy of their beloved grandfather to my children, Daniel and Chantal. Needless to say, my mother is overjoyed with this project, since she does not read Yiddish, and therefore has rediscovered the book after all these years. For this is a book that chronicles not only Eliezer Basch's experiences. It also interweaves the story of his beloved *B*, and how they managed to keep their deep love alive during their many years of separation and hardship.

The process of translation and discovery was easier said than done. I had very little knowledge of Yiddish when I started this project. I knew how to read the language (very haltingly), and I could understand basic vocabulary, but the literary Yiddish of my father was well beyond my abilities. Although I tried to teach it to myself, there was no way I could have attempted the translation alone. Therefore I enlisted the assistance of Sara Rosenfeld, a woman who is very active in the Yiddish cultural community in Montreal. Sara's help was invaluable. What we did was a great collaborative effort. We worked together over a period of almost two years. She and I would read the Yiddish silently together, and then Sara would speak the English translation into an audiotape. We often had to stop and check the dictionary for the appropriate term. I took the tapes home with me, and transcribed them into print on the computer.

Deciphering the literal translation was only the first step, albeit a very important one. I then had to try to revise and edit the English, supplementing the transcription with

additional research, especially for the (many) Hebrew references and historical facts. Never having undertaken a task of this magnitude before, I proceeded in stages. I started out by just modifying the audiotape transcription into 'good' English. Then I had to decide about the many Biblical, cultural and religious references. When I started this project, I only thought of it in terms of my immediate family, and so left in a lot of Yiddish and Hebrew words and expressions, as well as specific quotations from Biblical texts. I felt that close family members would appreciate seeing those references, because they are very relevant to the ideas my father was trying to convey. Then I began to read professional translations of Yiddish authors to get a feel for the language flow and the whole translation process. I noticed that those Biblical references and religious terms were often left out or modified in a way to make them accessible to non-Jews and those not particularly informed about the culture. And in fact, it does make these works easier to read. Once I considered having the work published for a wider audience, I began to re-edit the text and create a more universally accessible version. All the footnotes are my attempts at clarifying and explaining the background behind the historical, cultural, biblical and religious references.

The many Russian words and phrases and references to the Soviet prison system also presented quite a challenge. I reread *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch* and consulted *The Gulag Archipelago* by Solzhenitsyn to refine my vocabulary terms, and get a better grasp of the historical context.

Many times, while I was working on this translation, I would ask myself what my father meant by a particular phrase, or what was behind a specific event. My great regret

is that I did not have the opportunity to consult with him while in the process of translating his work. How I would have liked to have probed more and got more details about many aspects of the narrative! I am grateful, however, that he left me such a valuable part of himself, and enabled me to share with him – albeit posthumously – such an important part of his life.

In Chapter 11, *They Trod on My Name*, my father poignantly described how the NKVD desecrated his personal and religious articles. He was especially distressed to see how they manhandled his *t'fillin* and the pouch in which they were kept. His mother had lovingly and painstakingly embroidered his name on the pouch in gold letters inside a gold Star of David. He later added, "That was the last time in my life that I had the honour of seeing my name in gold letters..."

It is my great pleasure to see Eleizer Basch's name embossed in gold letters on the cover of this edition of *Under Stalin's Yoke*. Dad, this is for you.

Eva Basch

Glossary of Terms

bolnitsa:	infirmary (Russian)
brigadir:	brigade leader (Russian)
bushlat:	coat (Russian)
daven:	pray (Yiddish)
deka:	unit of measurement – 10 grams (Russian)
dezhurnyi :	jail guard (Russian)
dokhodiaga:	thin, weak prisoner who cannot fill the *norma* (Russian)
echalon:	troop transport (Russian)
erev:	the day before the Sabbath or a holiday (Hebrew/Yiddish)
etap:	procession of convicts (Russian)
kartzer :	solitary confinement (Russian)
kasha:	boiled cereal (Russian)
katorga:	slave labour (Russian)
katorzhanin:	slave labourer (Russian)
khametz:	leavened dough or bread, forbidden during Passover (Hebrew)
khorosho:	good (Russian)
kipyatok:	hot water (Russian)
lager:	prison camp (Yiddish/German)
lekhem oni:	bread of affliction (Hebrew)
makher:	people smuggler (Yiddish)
mitzvah:	religiously worthy act, good deed *(*pl. *mitzvoth)* (Hebrew)

nachalnik :	person in charge, administrator (Russian)
norma:	quota (Russian)
oblast:	province (Russian)
otkazchik, otkaz:	someone who refuses to work (Russian)
pachka:	wad (Russian)
palatka:	barracks (Russian)
parasha:	latrine bucket (Russian)
payok:	food portion (Russian)
perebezchik:	escapee, runaway (Russian)
prizharka:	place where clothes were sent to be disinfected (Russian)
proizvodstvo:	work site (Russian)
proverka:	roll call, head count (Russian)
ruki nazad:	hands behind you (Russian)
Seder:	the festive meal eaten on the first two nights of Passover (Hebrew)
shtetl:	a small town populated mostly by Jewish inhabitants (Yiddish)
shtrafnoi payok:	punishment portion (Russian)
shul:	synagogue (Yiddish)
sledovatel:	interrogator (Russian)
Stakhanovets:	overachiever (Russian)
starshiy:	overseer (Russian)
svidanie:	rendez-vous, meeting (Russian)
teplushka:	cattle car (Russian)

tovarishch:	comrade (Russian)
Vot molodets!	Good for you! What a clever guy you are! (Russian)
Yartzeit:	anniversary of a person's death (Yiddish)
zayavlenie:	request (Russian)
Zhid	derogatory term for Jew (Russian, Yiddish)
zhulik	thief, hardened criminal (Russian)

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